

**PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AN ADULT CHILD'S RELIGIOUS DECONVERSION:
AN INTERPRETIVE DESCRIPTION STUDY**

by

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of individuals are no longer identifying as religious. Religious change research has focused on this shift as well as explored how these individuals account for their religious change. Though links between religion and family are well-established in the literature, parents' perspectives on an adult child's religious change have largely been overlooked. In religious change research, parents are frequently portrayed as enacting theologically-rigid and relationally-punitive responses to a child's departure from the family's religious tradition.

Using semi-structured interviews, this study explored parents' experiences of a child's "deconversion" from the family's evangelical, Protestant religious tradition. Parents' accounts illustrated diverse definitions, attributions, and responses related to an adult child's religious change. In light of evangelical faith-keeping, parental culpability, and "shunning" discourses related to deconversion, parents' accounts reflected determined and resourceful approaches to upholding both family and faith commitments.

A child's deconversion illuminated a number of double binds for parents. For many participants, nurturing a child's critical thinking, for example, did not encourage a child to "make their faith their own" but, paradoxically, influenced a child's deconversion. Parents negotiated several seemingly irreconcilable positions by privileging certain biblical texts over others, questioning the interpretive accuracy of evangelical discourses related to deconversion, or separating domains of family and faith. The decision to respond to a child's deconversion in relationally-affirming ways often elicited a less-than-supportive response from a parent's faith community.

This research began to address the minimal attention on parents' perspectives of an adult child's religious deconversion. In the present study, parents' accounts departed from the polarized and divisive ways that familial religious differences are often characterized in both academic inquiry and popular discourse. Further, the intentional, reflective, and, at

times, evangelically-subversive responses to a child's deconversion diverged from how highly committed and theologically orthodox religious parents have been represented in the literature.

Lay Summary

Parents' perspectives of a child's religious change have been overlooked in the study of religion and family. This research began to address this issue by interviewing parents about their experiences of an adult child who had left the family's evangelical Christian tradition. Parents' decisions to maintain a healthy relationship with their child while continuing to model the importance of faith demanded thoughtful and difficult work. As parents' experiences involved questioning their ongoing responsibility for a child's faith, this often led to a negative response from the faith community. The ways that parents upheld the parent-child relationship in responding to a child's deconversion are very different from how parents' responses are often described in the study of religion and family.

Preface

This dissertation is the original work of the author, Glendon Wiebe. The research study was supervised by Dr. Barbara Pesut (Professor, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus; Canada Research Chair, Health, Ethics and Diversity) and committee members Dr. David Kuhl (Professor, Faculty of Medicine in the departments of Family Medicine and Urologic Sciences, University of British Columbia, Vancouver campus) and Dr. Thomas Heilke (Professor, Political Science, Irving K. Barber School of Arts and Sciences; Associate Dean, College of Graduate Studies; Advisor to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor on International Initiatives, University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of British Columbia (Okanagan campus) Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) prior to commencement of data collection and has met all the criteria for research with human subjects. The BREB Certificate of Approval for this research is #H15-01346.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to Alison.
In constancy and in change, you do.
I am forever grateful.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The self in research: My context and location

This study explores the question of how parents experience, respond to, and negotiate an adult child's departure from the family's faith tradition. Though I wish to give primacy to parents' perspectives in understanding this phenomenon, I must also locate myself by acknowledging how my family's response to my own religious change influenced the decision to pursue this research.

Almost 20 years ago, I began to experience difficulty reconciling my understanding of Christian truth with my observations of the world around me and, most significantly, with my inability to embody and bear witness to this truth. This was a very solitary journey in which the expression of my doubts and failures was confined to my personal journal. Many journal excerpts at this time reflected a struggle between feeling compelled to disclose my experiences to my family and hesitating to share this potentially hurtful information.

*"I continue to silently worry about my spiritual drift.
I can't see any way out of it
What could this mean for my family and
for the commitments I've boldly stated regarding my faith?"*

-May 30, 2000 journal excerpt

In considering departing from my family's faith tradition, I feared not only my parents' response but also what I would be left with if I walked away. Increasingly, my journal excerpts were a place in which I admitted my opposition to and, at the same time, deep connection to my faith tradition.

*"If I left the evangelical tradition, where would I go?
I would walk around dazed without my beloved enemy.
I am lost without this tradition."*

-September 5, 2001 journal excerpt

I felt strongly that I needed to make a decision about where I stood in relation to my faith. At the time, it seemed like I had explored every possible means of reconciling the divide between the ideals of faith and my failure to uphold these ideals. More and more, I was

pursuing (and sensed I was being drawn toward) other worldviews and truth claims. I did not lose sight of the fact that rejecting religion would likely hurt my family, but my posture toward faith had arrived at a point where I expected and, to some degree, needed a negative reaction to affirm the importance of my decision. This anticipated negative reaction, in my mind, would also confirm the inflexible nature of the faith I was rejecting.

Several years after these journal excerpts were written, I decided to tell my parents that I no longer identified as a Christian. I had prepared myself for relationally-momentous conversations, laden with conflict and emotion. My parents' response to my eventual disclosure, however, did not meet these expectations. I vividly recall driving home after this conversation had occurred and feeling a sense of deflation at the lack of oppositional ammunition that my parents' response had afforded. My experience of being listened to, being asked thoughtful questions, and having my process and autonomy respected in matters of faith came as a shock to me. Instead of needing to maneuver conflict or defend myself, I was faced with determining the next steps in my faith journey, a task I felt unprepared to engage in.

Since these interactions with my parents, I have studied and heard many accounts of individuals who have had a very different experience of their own family's reactions to religious change. I offer part of my own story not to discount the ways that religious differences in the context of family can often be a conflictual and hurtful negotiation, but to acknowledge how my experiences motivated the present study. Specifically, my parents' response to my religious change departed from how I expected my family to react. This suggested to me that families experience, respond to, and negotiate differences of faith in diverse ways. Though my own story has, undoubtedly, influenced my perspective on issues of family and religious change, I have endeavored to pursue and represent a wide range of parents' accounts and experiences.

The following section explores the contemporary cultural context in which religious change is occurring. As the present study focuses on one type of religious change within a particular religious tradition, the next sections define “evangelical, Protestant religious traditions” as well as the phenomenon of religious “deconversion”.

Background

In contemporary society, religion plays an intriguing, influential, and seemingly inconsistent role. The current state of religion in the West can be characterized as simultaneously flourishing and stagnant, stable and changing, galvanizing and polarizing. Though the nature and expression of religious belief, identity, and practice may be changing, religion remains a significant and influential socio-cultural force (Davie, 2013, p. xv; Gooren, 2010, p. 6; Smith, 2017, pp. 2, 26; Taylor, 2007, pp. 436-437, 513-516).

In the North American context, self-reported rates of religious affiliation and belief remain high. Recent Gallup polls note that “three-quarters of American adults identify with a Christian religion” (Newport, 2015, para. 1), 89% of Americans affirm a belief in God (Pew Research Center, 2013; see also Newport, 2011) and almost 50% affirm the biblical text as “the inspired word of God” (Jones, 2011, para. 1).

In the Canadian context, rates of religious identity and belief also remain high. Two-thirds of Canadians identify with a Christian tradition (Pew Research Center, 2015a) and over 80% of Canadian adults report “belief in God or a Higher Power” (Bibby, 2011, p. 49). The 2011 Statistics Canada National Household Survey (NHS) found that almost 75% of Canadians reported a religious affiliation. As these reports suggest, religion remains an influential and important consideration in contemporary society (Smith, 2017, pp. 80-83).

Amidst high levels of religious belief and affiliation, the cultural authority and institutional expression of religion is changing. Some congregations must close their doors and traditional religious moral and political authority is increasingly being contested (Bibby, 2011, pp. 22-26). More than at any other time in recorded history, individuals are identifying

themselves as having no religion (Bibby, 2011, pp. 47-48; Newport, 2010; Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, & Rößler-Namini, 2013; Streib, 2014; Zuckerman, 2012, pp. 3-4). These religious “nones” are the fastest growing North American “religious” group in recent decades. In the United States, the percentage of religious “nones” rose from very low levels (around 5%) in the 1950s and 1960s to 11% in 1990 and 16% in 2010 (Newport, 2010; see also Schwadel, 2010). A recent Pew Research Center (2015b) report found that between 2007 and 2014, the religiously unaffiliated increased from just over 16% to just under 23% of all American adults.

In the Canadian context, an Angus Reid Institute (2015) poll reported that 30% of Canadians identified themselves as “embracing” religion, 26% reported being inclined to “reject” religion, and 44% (termed the “ambivalent middle”; para. 3) expressed an “ambivalent” posture toward religion. The 2011 NHS results indicated that percentages of Canadians reporting no religious affiliation rose from 4% in 1991 to 16% in 2001 and then to almost 24% in 2011. To put these findings in a larger historical context, over the 90 year period between 1871 and 1961 in Canada’s history, “the percentage of people claiming to have ‘no religion’ never reached 1%” (Bibby, 2011, p. 9).

Though individuals are not leaving organized religion *en masse*, the “rise of the nones” – as the sociological phenomenon is often described – has wide-reaching implications. Religious institutions, denominations, and local congregations must negotiate the impact of these changes; the “rise of the nones” is also a phenomenon that enacts changes in family and social relationships (Bengtson, Putney, & Harris, 2013, p. ix) in which shared religious belief and practice are often understood as an important part of family identity and individual wellbeing (Dollahite, Marks, Kear, Lewis, & Stokes, 2018; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). The present study seeks to understand parents’ experiences of an adult child who leaves the family’s evangelical, Christian tradition. The following section outlines

characteristics of evangelical Christianity and discusses a particular type of religious change, defined as “deconversion”.

Evangelical, Protestant religious traditions

As the present research focuses on “deconversion” from a mainstream evangelical, Protestant religious tradition, defining this tradition is an important part of contextualizing parents’ experiences and accounts of their child’s religious change. Wilcox (2004) notes that mainstream evangelical, Protestant traditions are characterized by

a high view of biblical authority, usually expressed as the view that the Bible is the literal Word of God; a belief in Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation; and a belief that the Bible provides the primary guide to moral life. In practice, most of these churches also stress the importance of a personal experience of conversion – of being “born again”, in popular parlance – and of evangelizing non-believers.

(p. 15; see also Reimer, 2003, p. 6)

More generally, Smith (1998) suggests that for many American evangelicals,

“evangelical” as an identity label typically suggested a particular orientation of religious practice, an activist faith that tries to influence the surrounding world. For evangelicals themselves, this involves a heartfelt personal commitment to and experiential relationship with God, from which springs a readiness to take a stand and speak out for the faith. (pp. 242-243)

Drawing from these descriptions, the present study defines evangelical, Protestant traditions as those which, generally, uphold biblical literalism, soteriological exclusivism (“Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation”; Wilcox, 2004, p. 15), the primacy of the biblical text, and values of personal conversion, experiential faith (e.g., institutionally-mediated involvement in group study of the biblical text or congregational “worship”; see also Luhrmann, 2012, p. 35; Reimer, 2003, p. 20), and proselytization of non-believers (Smith, 2017).

Though these descriptions of evangelical characteristics draw from research within American evangelical contexts, a number of scholars have explored links and similarities between Canadian and American evangelicalism (Malloy, 2009; Reimer, 2003). Malloy (2009) notes how “the role of religion in public life and politics remains distinctly different in the two countries” (p. 360; see also Noll, 1997, pp. 12-20) yet argues that, politically, “differences between Canada and the United States may not be quite as large and clear-cut as they once were” (p. 352). The increasing visibility of an “American-style religious right in Canada” (p. 353) through various evangelical coalitions has sought to influence political and popular opinion in matters of reproductive rights and same-sex marriage, for example (pp. 357-358). At the same time, Malloy (2009) outlines “some evidence of a new, more moderate American evangelical political presence”, characterized by “increasing links and connections between the Democratic Party and moderate evangelicals who are not part of the Christian right” (p. 360). On an institutional level, increasing numbers of evangelical organizations are highlighting issues of social justice and the environment as opposed to an exclusive focus on issues of sexual orientation, family construction, and reproductive rights (p. 358).

Reimer (2003) discusses similarities between Canadian and American evangelicalism from the perspective of cultural expression and theological beliefs. Though Canadian and American evangelicals have, historically, differed on positions regarding the relationship between church and state and “intra-evangelical cooperation”, for example (Noll, 1997, p. 6), an increasing “transnational evangelical subculture” has blurred these distinctions (Reimer, 2003, p. 6). Reimer (2003) observes how evangelical media, literature, and even institutions “move freely across the border” (p. 5). As such, a North American evangelical subculture is sustained in which “similarities far out-number differences” between Canadian and American evangelical “belief, practices, and attitudes” (p. 21). Theologically, Reimer (2003) suggests that both Canadian and American evangelicals uphold the

importance of religious experience and conversion as well as orthodox doctrines relating to a personal God, the divinity of Christ, and the authority of Scripture (pp. 7, 20; see also Noll, 1997, pp. 10-11).

Despite the similarities between Canadian and American evangelicalism and the increasingly “transnational” nature of North American evangelical subculture, differences should not be minimized or dismissed. Further, descriptions of Canadian evangelicalism may have limited utility and transferability in addressing regional, political, and demographic distinctions within the Canadian evangelical landscape. Reimer (2003) states, “In fact, it may be that the forty-ninth parallel is a relatively insignificant boundary in comparison to regional differences within each country” (p. 32). While acknowledging the diversity of evangelical expression and attitudes – both between and within Canadian and American contexts – the present study assumes a level of transferability in American-based descriptions of evangelical belief and practice.¹

The “subcultural identity” of North American evangelicalism is often expressed, as discussed above, by an oppositional relationship with the dominant, secular culture (Smith, 1998, pp. 89ff). This “embattled” posture reinforces evangelicalism’s “subcultural identity” as well as motivates initiatives and coalitions aimed at influencing political and moral change. Smith’s (1998, pp. 89ff) “subcultural identity theory” is not only useful for considering evangelicalism’s relationship to (and within) the wider culture but also in understanding the value of “faith keeping” in these traditions. The successful transmission of religious values from parents to children in evangelical, Protestant traditions also serves to legitimize an evangelical, Protestant “subcultural identity” constructed, again, largely in opposition to secular values and institutions. The phenomenon of deconversion, however, potentially

¹ As presented in chapter 4, participants in the current study completed a battery of questionnaires in order to discern levels of institutional involvement, regularity of private religious practice, and assent to orthodox theological tenets.

disrupts the insider-outsider distinctions upon which evangelical identity is dependent (Edgell et al., 2016; Smith, 1998, pp. 117-119; see also Pargament, 1997, p. 201ff). In this sense, deconversion can also be understood as undermining the embodiment and enactment of a communal “subcultural identity” and ethic informing what and how to be in the world (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 49; Fowler & Reimer-Kirkham, 2011, p. 38).

Deconversion

Within mainstream evangelical, Protestant traditions, defining the phenomenon and meaning of religious change is also a key component in understanding parents’ experiences of a child’s departure from the family’s religious tradition. The present study focuses on a particular type of religious change – namely, that of “deconversion” in which a child rejects or leaves the family’s religious tradition. In the seminal work *Versions of Deconversion*, Barbour (1994) provides an oft-used definition of deconversion which aligns well with both evangelical, Protestant understandings of religious change as well as how individuals themselves express this change:

Deconversion involves doubt or denial of the truth of a system of beliefs. Second, deconversion is characterized by moral criticism of not only particular actions or practices but an entire way of life. Third, the loss of faith brings emotional upheaval, especially such feelings as grief, guilt, loneliness, and despair. Finally, a person’s deconversion is usually marked by the rejection of the community to which he or she belonged. (p. 2)

Similarly, Streib, Hood, Keller, Csöff, & Silver (2009) define deconversion as “intellectual, experiential, emotional and moral disengagement from a religion which, in most cases, leads to the termination of membership” (p. 13). This definition is used for the theoretical underpinnings of this study and in the overview of religious change literature discussed below as it reflects evangelical, Protestant understandings of authentic religious expression (see Luhrmann, 2012, pp. 13, 35) and allows for religious change to involve both individual

and institutional dynamics. This definition also distinguishes this type of religious change from that of religious “switching” or “intensification” (Faulkner, 2017; Roer-Strier, Sands, & Bourjolly, 2009; Roer-Strier & Sands, 2001, 2004; Sands & Roer-Strier, 2004). Though the term “deconversion” provides disciplinary and theoretical utility to situate this study, the particular ways that participants themselves define their child’s religious change is an important direction of inquiry, as discussed in the Methods section below.

As the focus of the present research centers on parents’ perceptions and self-reports of their child’s religious change or status, this multi-faceted definition attempts to capture potential diverse understandings and definitions of religious change (Bengtson et al., 2013, pp. 55-65; Dyck, 2010b). Defining this type of religious change as “deconversion” reflects the evangelical value of personal “conversion” (Wilcox, 2004, p. 15). In many evangelical traditions, the rejection of religion is understood as a moving away from religion versus toward another identity (Adam, 2009; Chalfant, 2011, pp. 17-19; Cragun & Hammer, 2011; Fazzino, 2014; Fisher, 2016; Harrold, 2006; McKnight & Ondrey, 2008, pp. 47-48).

The present study seeks to explore the phenomenon of deconversion in the context of evangelical, Protestant traditions. Specifically, parents’ experiences of an adult child’s departure from the family’s religious tradition will provide an often-overlooked perspective on deconversion in the context of family relationships. The following section outlines the rationale and research questions for the present study.

The current study

“The problem today isn’t those who are unchristian, but that so many are ex-Christian. Strictly speaking, they are not an ‘unreached people group’. They are our brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, and friends. They have dwelt among us.”

-Dyck, 2010b, p. 42

In many evangelical, Protestant traditions, an individual's deconversion presents a complex familial negotiation in light of evangelical expectations of a child's "faith-keeping" or adherence to the family's faith tradition (Bengtson et al., 2013, pp. 12-13; Godina, 2014; Wilcox, 2004, p. 49). Further, parents in these traditions are understood to be an important (if not the most important) influence in a child's faith-keeping (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009, pp. 117-118). The present study considers the experiences of parents whose adult child has departed from the family's religious tradition to expand the understanding of the impact of religious change on family relationships and identity. Specifically, this study explores the ways in which a child's deconversion potentially precipitates tensions between parents' respecting a child's autonomy, upholding expectations of faith-keeping, and maintaining a high quality parent-child relationship.

In religious change research, individual deconversion accounts often portray religious parents, leaders, and communities as oppositional, theologically rigid, and relationally punitive in their responses. A number of scholars have noted how individual's accounts of religious change frequently include the recounting of negative responses from family members (Crosby, 2007, pp. 200-203; Fazzino, 2014; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, pp. 46-55; Zuckerman, 2012, p. 7). This body of research also notes how deconversion accounts often rely on an oppositional relationship to the recently rejected religious tradition (Adam, 2009, p. 46; see also Bromley, 1998; Chalfant, 2011, p. 19; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Harrold, 2006; Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan, & Edwards, 2011).

The construction of deconversion from both academic and popular perspectives largely relies on an assumption of polarization between the religious and the "no longer" religious. This polarization is reinforced not only by an understanding and accounting of deconversion in opposition to religion but by the presentation of religious traditions, leaders, and families as opposing the individual who has left religion. For these individuals, the experience or anticipation of a "shared persecution" is a common deconversion account

convention and, some scholars argue, serves to legitimize deconversion accounts (Chalfant, 2011, p. 25). Just as a negative cultural response is evidence of correct belief within some conservative religious traditions (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005, p. 13), negative responses from the rejected religious tradition are often used to construct an individual's post-religious identity. This positioning of the individual as a "survivor" or "victim" provides confirmation of an "authentic" deconversion and post-religious identity (Streib et al., 2009, p. 223).

Portrayals of religious parents, leaders, and communities as oppositional and relationally-distancing in response to an individual's deconversion draw almost exclusively from individual accounts of deconversion and not from parents' own accounts of this phenomenon. This gap in family and religious change literature may also be attributable to assumptions – in social scientific inquiry - of how religious parents are assumed to respond to a child's deconversion in oppositional ways. Specifically, sociology of religion scholars have noted the tendency for researchers to assume that individual religiosity in one domain (e.g., personal or institutional) equates with and explains behaviors or responses concerning other domains (e.g., parenting or vocational). In this sense, parents' responses to a child's deconversion may be derived from approaches that "seem consistent" (Chaves, 2010, p. 5) with parents' religious beliefs (i.e., the importance of a child's "faith-keeping") instead of being constructed from parents' own accounts of a child's religious change.

The current research explores the extent to which parents' perspectives confirm or depart from deconversion account conventions suggesting that religious parents experience, respond to, and account for their child's deconversion in oppositional ways. Specifically, do parents' accounts of a child's religious change reflect a diversity of responses to a child's deconversion? If so, how do parents explain why they enacted a particular approach to the exclusion of other approaches?

From an applied perspective, knowledge derived from this research may inform intervention for family health in the negotiation of intergenerational religious differences.

Research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how parents experience, understand, and negotiate a child's deconversion. In light of evangelical discourses reinforcing a parent's role and responsibility to ensure a child's faith-keeping, do parents respond to a child's religious change in exclusively oppositional ways? To what extent are parents' responses to a child's deconversion relationally-informed? More specifically, the current study explores the following questions related to parents' perspectives of an adult child's religious deconversion:

1. How do parents define deconversion or that deconversion has occurred?
2. How do parents describe the reasons for/influences in their child's departure from the family's religious tradition?
3. How did parents respond to their child's departure from the family's religious tradition?
4. Over time, have parents approached or understood their child's departure differently than their initial approaches or perspectives?
5. What reasons do parents provide for responding to a child's deconversion in particular ways?

The next chapter provides a review of the literature related to the relationship between family and religion, religious change generally, and, finally, deconversion in particular. This review is followed by a discussion of the methods employed in the present inquiry.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“Our own families exemplify how religious pluralism is not merely an abstraction; pluralism is often personal.”

-Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 36

This chapter first outlines terminological distinctions between “religion” and “spirituality” in psychology and sociology of religion literature, followed by a discussion of the socio-cultural context in which contemporary expressions of religion are being enacted. The third section clarifies social scientific terminology related to religious change. The fourth section provides an overview of the literature pertaining to the reciprocal relationship between religion and family as well as the importance of religious socialization in evangelical traditions. The impact of conflict and, in particular, religious differences on family relational health is then discussed. Finally, research focused on individuals’ deconversion accounts and how parents are positioned in these accounts is presented.

Issues of definition in religious change research

Religion and spirituality

In psychology and sociology of religion research, minimal consensus has been reached in defining terms such as “religion” and “spirituality” (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Hill, 2013; Oman, 2013). Further, a number of scholars note that the separation of these terms is a relatively recent phenomenon (Hill et al., 2000, p. 57). Oman (2013) notes that “modern English meanings only emerged about two centuries ago” (p. 25) and that “toward the close of the 20th century, a new, more restricted meaning of religion emerged” (p. 26). Increasingly, contemporary definitions of religion emphasize “the organized and institutional components of faith traditions, as opposed to the more inward and personal sides, often now referred to as *spirituality*” (p. 26, emphasis in original). Academic and religious scholars

frequently discuss how, historically, the term “religion” captured both internal-external and personal-institutional components of belief, practice, and expression. From a contemporary, social scientific perspective, Pargament (1999) notes that “religion is moving from a broadband construct that includes both the institutional and the individual ... to a narrowband construct that has to do with the institutional side of life” (p. 6).

From a Christian theological perspective, scholars also note definitional shifts in understandings of “religion” and “spirituality”. The origin of the English word “religion” derives from the Latin “religio”, frequently understood as a bond or binding between humans and the divine (Hill et al., 2000, p. 56; Platvoet, 1999, pp. 472-473). Scholars of religion have explored how Protestant Reformation theologians influenced a movement away from these historical meanings. Platvoet (1999) discusses how the Reformation influenced a shift from the Roman notion of “religio” - related to ideas of “sanctity”, “ritual”, “awe”, “meticulousness” in acts of “worship”, and an “inward attitude of piety” – to more modern and institutionally mediated understandings of “religion” (pp. 468-469).

The influence of the Protestant Reformation on definitions of “religion” and “spirituality” are also reflected in Reformation-era translations of the biblical text, specifically relating to certain New Testament passages. Addressing a frequently disputed passage in the Letter to the Romans, for example, Summers (2017) suggests that the phrase “*logikē latreia*” - commonly understood and translated as “rational service/worship” or “reasonable serving of God” - was increasingly translated as “spiritual act of worship” (pp. 53ff). Numerous commentaries on biblical interpretation also suggest the former meaning/translation (see “Romans 12”, n.d.). Similarly, Summers (2017) argues that this shift was influenced more by “Platonist dualism” and the response of Reformation theologians to Catholic and “medieval ceremonialism” than by historical-critical hermeneutical considerations (pp. 48, 54). Biblical scholars have also explored the subsequent hermeneutical evolution of the term “spirituality”, noting its 17th century application to the

“interior life of the Christian”, its early “pejorative connotations” due to the “affective dimensions” of its use, and, more recently, its broad cultural usage (pp. 680-682).

Despite popular and academic departures from the historical origins and understanding of “religio”/religion, social scientific inquiry has attempted to define and differentiate the terms “religion” and “spirituality” in the interest of empirical inquiry. Hill et al. (2000) argue that “past attempts to define these constructs are often too narrow, resulting in operational definitions that foster programs of empirical research with limited value, or too broad, resulting in a loss of distinctive characteristics of religion and spirituality” (p. 52; see also Pesut & Thorne, 2007). On the one hand, using “religion” and “spirituality” synonymously does, in some respects, reflect ways that individuals equate these terms in the understanding and reporting of both institutionally and individually-mediated expressions of belief and practice (Hill, 2013; Oman, 2013; Pargament, 1999). Conversely, differentiating between these concepts reflects distinct processes, effects, and individual understandings of “religion” and “spirituality” (Holder, Coleman, & Wallace, 2010; Hood et al., 2009, pp. 9-12). Hood et al. (2009) note how operationally differentiating between “spiritual” and “religious” is increasingly being utilized in the psychology of religion. They observe that “the two terms are not synonymous, but distinct: Spirituality involves a person’s beliefs, values, and behavior, while religiousness denotes the person’s involvement with a religious tradition and institution” (p. 9).

Though “personal-institutional” or “psychological-sociological” dichotomies are, arguably, overly simplistic and potentially polarizing, these distinctions accurately reflect ways in which these terms are often utilized in psychology and sociology of religion research and in the following literature review.

Religious change terminology

In the sociological study of religion, the term “disaffiliation” is most often tied to the cessation of institutionally-mediated expressions of religion such as an individual’s church

membership or attendance. Measures of affiliation are often correlated with other demographic measures or sociological variables related to family, wellbeing, political and moral stances, or adolescent risk-taking behaviours.

Though used less frequently in sociology of religion literature (Cragun & Hammer, 2011), the term “deconversion” is often utilized in the psychological study of religious change (Fazzino, 2014; Harrold, 2006; Paloutzian et al., 2013; Rambo & Farhadian, 2014; Streib, 2014; Streib et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2011). Deconversion, as discussed above, is understood as the rejection of institutional religious identity as well as departure from individually and often cognitively-mediated expressions of religion. Though deconversion includes the cessation of institutional attendance, involvement, or membership, the use of the term within psychology of religion inquiry gives primacy to intrapersonal and cognitive dynamics of religious change.

The contemporary religious landscape: stability and change

The state and role of religion in North America presents a complex and often contradictory landscape. Though some religious institutions and expressions are alive and well, others struggle to retain influence and adherents. In the public sphere, new and diverse expressions of religiosity coexist with overt cultural criticism of religion (Bibby, 2011, pp. 71-76; Chalfant, 2011, pp. 24-26). As individuals redefine both the meaning and expression of religion, growing numbers are identifying themselves as having “no religion” (Bibby, 2011, pp. 47-48; Newport, 2010; Streib, 2014). Determining the state of religion in the West is also made difficult by the fact that religion can involve both individually and institutionally-mediated understandings and expressions.

In addition to the rise of the “nones”, recent sociological research notes the decreasing rates of church attendance (specifically among adolescent cohorts) and waning religious authority in cultural definitions of family and sexuality (see, for example, Altemeyer, 2004; Edgell, 2006, pp. 1, 10; Newport, 2010; Schwadel, 2010). Amidst these sociological

trends, scholars also note perspectives that challenge the assumption of general religious decline. Berger (2001) poetically observes: “As I see the evidence, the world, with some notable exceptions ... is as religious as it has ever been, and in some places is more religious than ever Put simply, most of the world is bubbling with religious passions” (p. 445). Similarly, Davie (2013) suggests that an assumption and expectation of secularization (as historically observed in Europe) in sociology of religion inquiry has become more influential than “the fact that religion is, and remains, a profoundly normal part of the lives of the huge majority of people in the late-modern world” (p. 2).

Addressing the American context, a number of scholars suggest that findings of rampant institutional religious decline may simply be overstated (Davie, 2013, p. x; Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 132). More specifically, the averaging or aggregating of attendance rates often utilized in sociology of religion research, for example, fails to identify how specific religious traditions or denominations are experiencing stable or even increased attendance (Chaves, 2011, p. 10; Pearce & Denton, 2011, pp. 17, 31). Additionally, assumptions of decline often rely on institutionally-mediated expressions of religion to the exclusion of more individual, subjective understandings and expressions (Gooren, 2010, pp. 4-5, 9; Stark, 1999).

Despite difficulties involved in providing declarative descriptions of the state of religion in the West, there are denominations and traditions which are experiencing declining attendance, decreased cultural influence, and past adherents who are presently identifying as non-religious (Altemeyer, 2004; Streib, 2014). Scholars of religion have proposed a number of dynamics and factors to consider in the understanding of these religious changes. The roles of modernity, secularization, and cultural diversity in changing religious belief and expression have received significant attention (Davie, 2013; Gooren, 2010; Taylor, 2007). Modern life is increasingly characterized by geographical and psychological mobility, technology, and urbanization which can facilitate interaction with diverse individuals and the

consideration of alternate viewpoints (Chaves, 2011, p. 11; Putnam & Campbell, 2010, pp. 5-6). Scholars also attribute increases in the number of religious “nones” to the decreasing social stigma of identifying as “non-religious” and/or a reaction to politicized, “hypocritical”, or intolerant expressions of religious belief and practice (Bibby, 2011, pp. 22-24; Edgell, 2006, pp. 19, 39, 88, 107ff; Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 3; Wilcox, 2004, p. 82).

The Canadian religious change landscape

Considering the Canadian context of religious change, few scholars would refute findings suggesting that increasing numbers of Canadians are no longer identifying as religious. As noted above, the 2011 National Household Survey found that “some 7.8 million Canadians, almost 25% of the total population compared to less than 1% in 1961, identified themselves as having No Religion” (Clarke & Macdonald, 2017, p. 6).

Several sociology of religion scholars have explored how these changes in the Canadian religious landscape – most often focused on Christianity – were a function of “the anti-establishment ethos of the 1960s” and the Canadian “vision of a multicultural country” (Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015, p. 46). Reimer & Wilkinson (2015) suggest that this increased “attention on individual rights” was reinforced, for example, by the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms (p. 46). Bibby (2017) concurs that the 1960s were characterized by a shifting in Canadians’ – particularly the large numbers born between the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s – posture toward religion. He notes the role of diversity, individualism, and a changing relationship with and understanding of authority (pp. 21-29; see also Bowen, 2004, p. 44). Similarly, scholars also note how cultural shifts related to reproductive rights and increasing number of women entering the workforce, for example, influenced families’ and, in particular, women’s relationship to and involvement with institutional religion (Bibby, 2017, pp. 29-32; Clarke & Macdonald, 2017, pp. 18, 228-229).

Turning to Canada’s current religious landscape and, specifically, demographic characteristics of “No Religion” individuals, Clarke and Macdonald (2017) suggest that “the

proportion of people with No Religion increases as one goes from east to west” and is higher in “large urban areas” (p. 165; see, however, Hay, 2014, pp. 152-153 for a discussion of findings suggesting limited support for the role of “urbanization effects” in measuring the recent rise of the religious “nones”). Additionally, more Canadian males than females (about 54% and 46%, respectively) reported “No Religion” in 2011; Canadians between the ages of 25 and 44 comprised almost 30% of individuals reporting “No Religion” in the 2011 National Household Survey (Clarke & Macdonald, 2017, pp. 166-170). A report commissioned by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (Penner, Harder, Anderson, Désorcy, & Hiemstra, 2011) entitled *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church* notes that

For every five Catholic and Mainline Protestant kids who attended church at least weekly in the 1980s and '90s only one still attends at least weekly now as an adult; for those raised in Evangelical traditions it is one in two. And that's not all. Most who have quit attending altogether also have dropped their Christian affiliation.

(p. 5; emphases in original)

In survey results of over 2000 respondents between the ages of 18 and 34, Penner et al. (2011) revealed that “the decline in attendance between childhood and teen years is greater than the subsequent decline between the teen years and adulthood” (p. 21). The report also highlighted that “when young adults stop affiliating with the tradition of their childhood they are usually not re-affiliating with another organized tradition, Christian or otherwise. The majority are identifying as atheist, agnostic, spiritual, or none” (p. 25; see also p. 78). Looking beyond this particular age cohort, Clarke & Macdonald (2017) argue that most Canadians who have ceased to affiliate with Christian traditions have not switched their religious affiliation but have “ended up with No Religion” (p. 71). Similarly, Thiessen (2015) notes, “As Christian identification, belief, and practice slides, it is not to other religions mainly (even though religious diversity is on the rise). Christianity is losing ground as religious

nones rapidly increase” (p. 7).

Additionally, a relatively recent and intriguing phenomenon occurring in the Canadian religious landscape involves the increasing proportion of religious “nones” whose religious identity is a function of an upbringing that did not include religious affiliation and/or involvement. Clarke & Macdonald (2017) observe:

Whereas from the 1960s through to the 1990s we saw the disaffiliation and alienation of Canadians who were raised in Christian homes and attended church in their youth, we now have a generation – or a significant portion of one – who have never belonged to a church and are entirely unfamiliar with Christianity. (p. 71)

More generally, Thiessen (2015) suggests, “As has gradually developed since the 1960s, religion no longer serves as a common base of ultimate meaning in Canadian society, for better or worse” (p. 189).

The growing numbers of religious “nones” in Canada is seldom disputed yet sociologists of religion do not always agree on the extent, meaning, and future implications of these changes for Canadian society in general and institutional churches in particular (Bibby, 2017; Clarke & Macdonald, 2017; Thiessen, 2015). Scholars highlight the religious vitality of particular denominations in Canada (Thiessen, 2015, p. 176) and the significance of congregational forms of religious expression for many evangelical Protestants (Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015, p. 4) in particular. In his discussion of the 44% of Canadians who, in 2015, self-identified as “ambivalent” toward religion, Bibby (2017) suggests that “contrary to the widespread perception among religious leaders, academics, and other observers, Canadians located in the religious middle certainly have not abandoned faith. On the contrary, they have much in common with people who embrace religion” (p. 84). Bibby (2017) posits that the health of religious groups depends on their ability to “effectively address the needs of people relating to ultimacy – led by the question of life after death” (p. 196).

Scholars differ in their prognostications of whether or not Canadians who are “ambivalent” toward religion will, over time, continue to move away from religious affiliation or be drawn toward (or back toward) religion. These discussions often utilize theoretical “market models” of religious affiliation and involvement to explore changes in collective and individual religiosity. In past decades, Rodney Stark and colleagues have sought to “apply economic models of the market to the operation of religious economies” (Stark & Iannoccone, 1994, p. 232). From this theoretical framework, religious change is understood in terms of religious supply and demand influenced, in part, by religious suppliers and religious consumers. Scholars reflecting on religious change and the religiously “ambivalent” in Canada draw upon different aspects of this model to both explain and predict Canadian religiosity.

In these market model terms, religious demand, for some scholars, is understood to be constant (Bibby, 2017, pp. 190, 220); thus, the future of Canada’s religiously “ambivalent middle” is a supply-side issue, dependent on the institutional church’s response to Canada’s current proportion of individuals “ambivalent” towards religion. Other scholars, however, challenge the idea that supply-side changes in the Canadian religious “market” will influence the “ambivalent” toward increased religious affiliation, identity, or involvement. Though Thiessen (2015) notes that “supply and demand are both at work” in understanding the contemporary Canadian religious landscape, he argues that demand-side dynamics offer “a more compelling explanation” (p. 146). In his interviews with “marginal affiliates” and “religious nones”, very few individuals “who say they desire or perhaps desire greater involvement have attempted greater involvement” (p. 153). In this sense, “people are not leaving behind their religious involvement or affiliation because religious groups did something to make them leave” (p. 148). Thiessen (2015) concludes that “the demand for religion is likely to continue to diminish in light of dominant Canadian values that are generally at odds with organized religious belief and practice as once known in Canada” (p. 190). Similarly, Clarke & Macdonald (2017) note that “people are not only leaving

churches; they are leaving Christianity. And many of them have no interest in returning” (p. 210).

Despite the changing and often declining role of religion in Canada, evangelical, Protestant congregations are, relative to many other denominational expressions, faring well. Reimer & Wilkinson (2011) observe, “Evangelicals are still going to church, and the majority still hold to their churches’ teaching.... evangelical Protestantism is a uniquely congregational style of Canadian religion, and its institutional form remains relatively strong” (p. 16). In Canada and beyond, institutional affiliation, involvement, and commitment remain important components of how religion is understood, expressed, and researched.

Religious change in the sociology and psychology of religion

Contemporary religious belief, identity, and expression have traditionally been understood in terms of an individual’s relationship to a religious community and “lived within a community of faith” (Fowler & Reimer-Kirkham, 2012, p. 38). In many religious traditions, the embodiment and enactment of a religious ethic – what and how to be in the world – is inextricably tied to one’s connection to and solidarity with a religious institution or congregation (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 49; Fowler & Reimer-Kirkham, 2012). This solidarity is essential for both the enacted, communal religious ethic as well as the constitution of a collective religious identity, often in relation to the wider, secular culture (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 50; Edgell, Hartmann, Stewart, & Gerteis, 2016; Farrell et al., 2017; Smith, 1998, pp. 121ff).

In the sociological study of religious change, the construction of deconversion (or disaffiliation) is often equated with and measured by a decrease or cessation of attendance or institutional involvement (Petts, 2009; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Schwadel, 2010; Smith, Faris, Denton, & Regnerus, 2003). On the individual level, religious variables are often correlated with adolescent and young adults’ attitudes toward sexual ethics and behaviour, substance use, family attachment, relationship with peers, risk-taking proclivity, and personal

autonomy (Denton, 2012; Desmond, Morgan, & Kikuchi, 2010; Leonard, Cook, Boyatzis, Kimball, & Flanagan, 2012; Petts, 2009; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Schwartz, 2006; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). Sociological inquiry also explores relationships between personality, demographics, and life cycle effects, for example, and religious affiliation, attendance, and involvement (Edgell, 2006, pp. 45ff; Smith & Snell, 2009, pp. 103ff; Wilcox, 2004, pp. 104ff).

Though often overlapping with sociological inquiry, the psychology of religion explores individual processes, motivations, and the role of personality in the understanding, belief, and expression of religion (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p. 117; Hood et al., 2009, p. 3). In the psychology of religion, religious change and, specifically, deconversion are informed by individuals' levels of cognitive assent to theological tenets, private religious practice, and individual accounts of religious meaning, identity, and expression (Paloutzian et al., 2013, p. 408; Paloutzian & Park, 2013, Streib, 2014, p. 273).

In addition to the focus of sociology and psychology of religion on institutional and individual expressions of religious change, respectively, scholarly attention has increasingly explored the role of family in religious development, identity, belief, and practice. Relationships between individual religiosity and family structure, parenting style, family conflict, and parent-child relationship quality, for example, have established that the family is a significant locus of contemporary religious identity and expression (Hardy, White, Zhang, & Ruchty, 2011; Marks & Dollahite, 2017, pp. 37ff). As religious expression, identity and belief are tied to aspects of family structure, health, and conflict, religious differences and, in particular, deconversion are potentially critical factors in familial relational health (Colaner, Soliz, & Nelson, 2014; Dollahite, Marks, & Young, 2017; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009).

The relationship between religion and family

Sociological and psychological study of religious development and change has consistently found that family and, by extension, parents have a (if not the most) significant

role in a child's religiosity. Globally, Beit-Hallahmi (2015) concludes, "Individual religious identity is, in the vast majority of cases, totally predictable in terms of culture and intergenerational continuity.... Ninety-nine percent of the world's religious believers have followed parental and communal teachings in acquiring the belief system they hold" (p. 40; see also Hardy et al., 2011; Hood et al., 2009, pp. 117-118; Pearce & Thornton, 2007; Schwartz, 2006). Amidst sociological discussion of the significant roles of secularization, pluralization, peers, and technology in adolescent religious formation, research consistently affirms the "central role of parents and the family" (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015, p.45; see also Bengtson et al., 2013, p. 56; Pearce & Denton, 2011, p. 23; Smith & Snell, 2009, pp. 86, 232). Hood et al. (2009) note, "Parents play an extremely important role in the developing religious attitudes and practices of their offspring. In fact, few researchers would quarrel with the conclusion that parents are the most important influence in this regard" (pp. 117-118).

An extensive range of variables related to parenting style and religiosity as well as family structure, conflict, and relational quality are correlated with measures of (almost exclusively) adolescent religious identity, expression and change (Boyatzis, 2006; Denton, 2012; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008; Marks, 2006; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006; Smith & Sikkink, 2003, p. 190; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Similarly, measures of family structure, family disruption, parent-child relationship quality, parenting style, and parental religiosity have been correlated with adolescent religious identity and practice (Boyatzis, 2006; Denton, 2012; Desmond et al., 2010; Leonard et al., 2012; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2008; Marks, 2006; Marks & Dollahite, 2017; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006; Smith & Sikkink, 2003, p. 190; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Scholars have also suggested that familial religiosity can be understood as a "transactional" or "bi-directional" process in which parents exert religious influence on their children and, simultaneously, children influence parents' understanding, identity and expression of religious belief and practice (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2006; Schwartz, 2006).

Due to the general efficacy of religious socialization, the phenomenon of deconversion presents an intriguing anomaly to the expectation of a child's faith-keeping. In many religious traditions, the family is positioned as "the primary agent of education, both religious and social" (Caffrey Bourg, 2004, p. 43; see also Marks & Dollahite, 2017, p. 139; Wilcox et al., 2004) and, thus, an important context in which to understand contemporary religious stability and change. Perhaps most notably in evangelical, Protestant traditions, the family is upheld as a sacred refuge from encroaching cultural or secular values. Some scholars have suggested that religious discourse regarding a perpetual "crisis in the family" serves to reinforce both the sacredness of family as well as boundary markers between religious and secular values (Wilcox, 2004, p. 66; see also Godina, 2014; Smith, 1998, pp. 129-132; Wilcox, 2008; Wilcox, Chaves, & Franz, 2004; Wright, Zozula, & Wilcox, 2012). Within these traditions, the sanctification of family is often tied to parents' responsibility to promote faith-keeping or the transmission of religious values from parent to child (Bengtson et al., 2013, pp. 12-13; Dollahite et al., 2018; Godina, 2014; Hood et al., 2009, p. 112; Wilcox, 2004, p. 50). Further, children are seen as a divine responsibility and transmission of faith from parent to child "is considered an aspect of Christian stewardship" (Bengtson et al., 2013, p. 177).

Sociology and psychology of religion literature also suggest that religion, by and large, exerts a positive influence in family relational health and outcomes of adolescent well-being (Godina, 2014; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). In reciprocal fashion, a high quality parent-child relationship and a positive home environment have been correlated with effective religious socialization (Denton, 2012; Marks & Dollahite, 2017, pp. 135ff; Stearns & McKinney, 2017; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009; Wilcox, 2008). This literature has approached the relationship between religion and family from both these directions – namely, how aspects of religion influence family and, conversely, how family dynamics and characteristics impact religious belief and practice.

The influence of religion on family

A large body of literature suggests that institutional and individual facets of religion correlate with family identity, structure, conflict, and relationships (Dollahite et al., 2018; Pearce & Thornton, 2007; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Dollahite et al. (2018) suggest, “For most religious parents, two of the things they are likely to care most deeply about are their faith and their children” (p. 44). As discussed above, a number of scholars have outlined ways in which religious values “sanctify” the role of parenting (Godina, 2014; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2008; Marks, 2006; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006; Wilcox, 2008). Mahoney (2010) explains that

many people perceive a family relationship as having divine significance and character, by viewing the bond either as having sacred qualities (e.g., is sacred; is part of a larger spiritual plan) or as a manifestation of God (e.g., God plays a role in the relationship; it is a reflection of God’s will). (p. 820)

Religion can also inform approaches to how family members understand and address conflict (Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Mahoney, 2005). Many of these studies note the potential for religiously-informed approaches to parenting and conflict resolution to lead to both adaptive and maladaptive interactions (Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009; Mahoney et al., 2008; Marks, 2006; Marks & Dollahite, 2017, pp. 135ff; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). Drawing from their research on the use of “theistic mediation and triangulation” in parent-adult child conflict resolution, Brelsford and Mahoney (2009) propose that these religiously-informed strategies effectively assist in resolving conflict and facilitated positive relational outcomes in some situations. In other situations, however, “certain forms of theistic mediation, albeit frequently perceived in a positive light, may be perceived by some individuals as removing oneself from a conflictual situation rather than dealing with it in a straightforward fashion” (p. 300; see also Brelsford, 2011, pp. 294-295).

Though religion and family literature distinguishes between religiously-based conflict

and general conflict, there may be types of conflict where these distinctions are blurred. Stokes and Regnerus (2009) note that “parents who care about religion appear to be frustrated with their children who do not [care], creating an environment with both opportunities for conflict and for inscribing ‘normal’ conflict with religious meaning” (p. 164; see also Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). Similarly, Dollahite et al. (2017) discuss ways that religion can “generate” as well as “address” family conflict.

The influence of family on religion

In addition to the focus on the impact of religion on family, research also explores these influences in the reverse direction – namely, the role of family characteristics in individual religious identity and expression. In the sociology of religion, an extensive range of variables including parenting style, family structure, conflict, and parent-child relational quality are correlated with measures of individual religiosity. This direction of inquiry almost exclusively focuses on adolescent religious identity, expression, and change (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997, p. 210; Boyatzis, 2006; Denton, 2012; Desmond et al., 2010; Longo & Jungmeen, 2014; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2008; Marks, 2006; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Smith & Sikkink, 2003, p. 190; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009; Wilcox, 2008). These findings consistently suggest that higher quality parent-child relationships correlate with higher religious similarities between parents and children (Desmond et al., 2010; Godina, 2014; Hardy et al., 2011; Leonard et al., 2012; Petts, 2009; Schwartz, 2006; Stearns & McKinney, 2017). Conversely, family disruption and conflict are negatively correlated with the religious transmission of values from parents to children (Regnerus & Burdette, 2006).

Though parents’ consistent modeling of religious values, upholding of a high quality parent-child relationship, and minimization of family disruption and conflict are understood as effective in a child’s faith-keeping, not all children – adolescent or otherwise – adopt the family’s faith tradition. In light of the reciprocal relationship between family and religion, a

child's deconversion potentially calls into question the efficacy of these pathways of religious socialization. The negotiation of religious differences between family members may lead to conflict and relational strain, dynamics that may further decrease the efficacy of successful religious socialization. As a number of scholars have suggested, however, how familial religious differences are understood and how they are discussed often impacts the influence and wellbeing of family relationships (Colaner et al., 2014; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009; Zimmerman, Smith, Simonson, & Myers, 2015).

Religious change and family relational health

Family conflict and relational strain are understood to negatively impact the efficacy of parents' transmission of religious values and identity (Denton, 2012; Dollahite et al., 2017). Similarly, religiously-based differences or conflict can negatively impact the parent-child relationship and, thus, religious socialization (Regnerus & Burdette, 2006; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Within these bodies of literature, the substantive content of these conflicts – whether general or involving issues of religion - is infrequently explicated or acknowledged. This gap makes it difficult to pursue a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religion and family, specifically when religiously-based conflict or familial religious differences are concerned. Stokes and Regnerus (2009) differentiate between general family conflict and parent-child conflict related to religious salience, affiliation, and attendance. In their research of “religious discord and adolescent reports of parent-child relations”, the authors note that, “the effect of religious discord on parent-child relations seems to vary by the source of the discord” (p. 162). Further, “discordant salience is more aggravating on adolescent reports of parent-child relationship quality than are discordant attendance or affiliation” (p. 163). Though it is helpful to consider that family conflict regarding religious salience may be more relationally problematic than conflict involving affiliation or attendance, knowing little about the content or context of the

conflict limits understanding of how religious conflict or change impacts family relationship health.

A small body of research explores the impact of an adult child's religious intensification on family relational health. Roer-Strier and Sands (2001) interviewed 15 South African Jewish mother-daughter dyads in which an adult daughter had intensified their religious identity from that of moderate or secular Judaism to an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish identity. Mothers identifying with moderate or secular Judaism were interviewed about their reactions to their daughter's religious intensification.

Initially, some mothers reported a level of acceptance of their daughter's choice to adhere to a religious tradition that encouraged structure and discipline. Other mothers, however, had concerns that religious intensification would limit their daughter's social, career, or economic opportunities. Mothers in this study also experienced fears that family celebrations would be disrupted. Over time, mothers reported varying levels of accommodation to their daughter's religious change. Some mothers familiarized themselves with their daughter's Ultra-Orthodox Jewish tradition and were able to accept components of this new expression (e.g., the value of family). A few mothers remained "negative" in their response to their daughter's decision and relationships were characterized by frequent conflict and decreased interaction. Several mothers who initially responded ambivalently to their daughter's religious intensification became, over time, more concerned about disruption of the relationship with grandchildren.

In a similar study, Roer-Strier and Sands (2004) focused on the familial impact of an adult daughter's intensification from a secular to an Orthodox expression of Judaism. This study compared the accounts of 15 South African and 17 American ("primarily biologically related") mother-daughter dyads (p. 488). Mothers identifying with moderate or secular Judaism reported concerns that their daughter's religious intensification would limit educational opportunities, stifle independence, reinforce strict gender roles, inhibit a sense of

Jewish culture and a “secular-religious balance”, and result in a loss of “intergenerational continuity” and connection with grandchildren (pp. 489-493).

Sands and Roer-Strier (2004) also looked more specifically at adult daughters’ religious intensifications which coincided with a geographical move away from their family of origin. The interview sample was “comprised of 9 mothers and 15 daughters. Of these, 7 mothers and 7 daughters were related to one another” (p. 222). In this study, some mothers (again identifying with moderate or secular Judaism) reported initial acceptance, some understood their daughter’s decision as a “stage”, and others reported feeling rejected. Interestingly, over time, “the mothers became more positive or ambivalent about the religious intensification and more negative or ambivalent about the daughters’ immigration [to Israel]” (p. 108).

In a more recent study focusing on African American families, Christian mothers were interviewed about the impact of their daughter’s conversion from Christianity to Islam (Roer-Strier et al. (2009). This research included interviews with 14 biologically-related mother-daughter dyads. Mothers’ initial reactions included “emotional distraughtness”, “rationalizations”, and, for some, “early acceptance”. Mothers felt “surprised, shocked, betrayed, guilty, distressed, and angry” (p. 223). Concerns about a daughter’s religious switching related to “the daughter’s divergence from her parents’ religion (Christianity) and traditions, loss of family continuity, and the daughter’s lifestyle and appearance” (p. 223). Some mothers’ reactions involved making fun of the daughter’s conversion, treating it as a “phase”, or blaming the daughter’s partner for the conversion. A few mothers, however, expressed some level of initial acceptance of their daughter’s choice. Over time, some mothers had “lingering doubts” about their daughter’s choice while others exhibited “increased respect and acceptance” (p. 224). Ongoing issues included mothers’ questioning of the authenticity of the conversion, difficulties with specific theological tenets of Islam, and “feelings of anger, a sense of loss, and the guilt that they experienced initially” (p. 224). For

some mothers, acceptance over time was described as a function of respecting their daughter's choice and autonomy, ensuring an ongoing relationship with their daughter, or learning more about Islam.

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of examining the content, context, and the process (initially and over time) of familial religious conflict or change. In the studies summarized above, mothers' initial reactions to a daughter's religious change were often described as negative or ambivalent; over time, however, many families invoked strategies to maintain relational health and connection. In their initial study, Roer-Strier & Sands (2001) concluded that

on the whole, mothers and daughters were able to honor both religious and familial obligations despite emerging intergenerational differences adults with strong convictions were able to be true to their beliefs and express their disapproval of each other while they found ways to ensure family cohesion and mutual respect. (p. 876)

This body of literature provides valuable insight into the familial impact of religious change, specifically regarding ways in which parents negotiate values of religious and intergenerational continuity while respecting an adult child's autonomy. At the same time, the authors note several limitations – namely, the exclusive focus on mother-daughter dyads and on mothers who identify (other than the most recent study) with moderate or secular Judaism. Additionally, dynamics related to immigration and the specific religious and cultural contexts of these studies may not apply to religious change processes with other groups. Religious intensification and religious switching may have similar or distinct processes and dynamics from a child's deconversion from the family's faith tradition (Faulkner, 2017; Sikkens, van San, Sieckelink, & de Winter, 2018). The reactions, processes, and outcomes of mothers' negotiations of their daughters' religious change do not characterize every family's experience of religious change yet provide, as will be discussed below, a contrasting perspective to the polarized discourse often characterizing discussions of familial religious

differences. Though little is known about parents' experiences of a child's deconversion from a mainstream evangelical, Protestant tradition, deconversion accounts of individuals who have left these traditions provide valuable insight into how this decision impacts or is anticipated to impact family relationships.

Deconversion and family relational health

In recent decades, the majority of deconversion research has taken one of two forms (most notably in the psychology of religion). The first explores the process and outcomes of deconversion through qualitative, semi-structured interviews and/or quantitative measures of personality, religious orthodoxy, or faith development (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Cameron, 2008; Crosby, 2007; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Streib et al., 2009; Zuckerman, 2012). The second involves content and narrative analyses of existing deconversion accounts. This focus of inquiry seeks to understand how the phenomenon of deconversion is constructed and portrayed in these narrative accounts (Adam, 2009; Chalfant, 2011; Fazzino, 2014; Harrold, 2006; McKnight & Ondrey, 2008; Wright et al., 2011).

Interview analyses

In deconversion research involving analyses of interviews with participants who have left their family's religious tradition, the impact on familial relational health ranges from being portrayed as a crucial dynamic and consideration (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Cameron, 2008; Crosby, 2007, Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006) to being minimally acknowledged (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Smith, 2011; Streib et al., 2009; Zuckerman, 2012) to not being mentioned at all (Brent, 1994).

Cameron (2008) observes that for many individuals who were raised in and later left "fundamentalist" religious traditions, "the issue of unfulfilled longing for relationship with their parents" was a crucial component in understanding their narrative accounts (p. 98). Further, "parents in particular were characterized as being primary sources of pain due to their

dogmatic actions, words, and behaviours” (p. 110). Similarly, Crosby’s (2007) study of individuals who had left the family’s religious tradition included a theme of “family dissonance” as “all participants either felt separated, anxious, or alienated from their family of origin ... when they changed their religious beliefs” (p. 196). Some participants described how their families felt rejected, pressured them to return, and demonstrated “blatant disapproval with insults” (p. 206). Crosby (2007) presents some specific family situations (e.g., a Christian grandmother not attending a participant’s pagan wedding ceremony) yet the processes and longer-term outcomes of deconversion on family relational health are not discussed. Similarly, Zuckerman’s (2012) interviews with individuals who have left religion reflect a range of family responses, including a general “rejection by one’s family” (pp. 7, 129), a parent “just crying and crying over my soul” (p. 26), acceptance (p. 25), and, in the case of a Mormon individual, shunning and vilification (pp. 71-72).

In *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith and Others Abandon Religion*, Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) interviewed “Amazing Apostates (AAs)” – university students who scored in the top quartile of the *Religious Emphasis* (in one’s family of origin) *Scale* and the bottom quartile of the *Religious Orthodoxy* (as currently understood by the student) *Scale*. In addition to questions regarding the etiology and content of initial religious doubts, students were asked if their parents knew about their current religious beliefs (pp. 261-264). Many students noted that parents did not yet know the extent of their child’s disbelief as parents were often perceived as reticent to discuss their child’s religious change. Over a third of students expressed that the cost of their decision included a “painful deterioration in relationships with their parents” (p. 117). Some students recounted that their parents hoped that their child’s deconversion was a “stage” or temporary act of rebellion. At the same time, parental responses rarely involved overt opposition or a severing of relational ties. Though some parents’ responses were characterized as neutral or even understanding, when AAs “rejected their parents’ basic religious beliefs, they caused their mothers and

fathers, and themselves, much pain” (p. 213). In this research and throughout deconversion literature more generally, individuals leave religion reluctantly and with high levels of awareness of the familial cost of their decision (Adam, 2009). Religious change is seldom described by individuals as an act of rebellion or protest against their parents (Smith & Snell, 2009, pp. 232-233).

Similarly, in Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s (2006) interviews of active atheists, strained family relationships was a common theme. Some study participants were shunned by family, several individuals shared very little information with families about their atheism, some families expressed that they felt their adult child had been influenced by the devil or Satan, and one participant “lost her inheritance” (pp. 45-53). Though an individual’s “active atheism” may spawn certain types of family responses (p. 123), the recounting of specific family dynamics or interactions regarding religious change is infrequently explored in extant deconversion literature. Further, discussion of family reactions to a child’s religious change often portray parents’ responses as oppositional, theologically rigid, or relationally punitive. Two notable exceptions include Colaner et al.’s (2015) findings of both “accommodative” and “nonaccommodative” parent communication styles and Zimmerman et al.’s (2015) findings of both “supportive” and “unsupportive” parent responses relating to a child’s deconversion.

Other deconversion studies include a limited treatment of the relationship between deconversion and family yet provide concrete examples of parental responses. Smith’s (2011) exploration of “atheist identity formation” presents a participant’s account in which she describes her father’s reaction as “pretty cruel” and involving “e-mails about how bad liberals and atheists are” (p. 230). Similarly, Fazzino (2014) notes, “Exiting Evangelical Christianity often resulted in the loss of family and peer groups and was a catalyst for negative emotional experiences” as shown in one particular account: “Elizabeth (atheist) re-located to a new city 2,000 miles away after her parents had told her to pack her things and leave their home....

Years after her deconversion, Elizabeth was able to be reconciled to her parents” (pp. 259-261).

Though such examples reflect specific ways in which deconversion impacted family relational health, these are the only times deconversion and family are addressed in these two studies. These brief and isolated vignettes are limited in facilitating an understanding of why families react in such ways and, in the last example, factors leading to reconciliation. Once again, Zimmerman et al.’s (2015) outlining of specific contexts and content of parent-child discussions of a child’s deconversion provides an instructive exception.

The cross-cultural, mixed-methods research of Streib et al. (2009) explores the phenomenon of deconversion in both Germany and the United States. In addition to qualitative interviews of individuals who had left religion, data was gathered on the type of tradition from which the individual had deconverted as well as measures of participant personality, faith development, religious style, psychological wellbeing, and religious fundamentalism. As this research focused on cross-cultural differences of deconversion antecedents and processes, family dynamics were addressed infrequently. In one participant’s account, for example, Streib et al. (2009) explain that “the central tension throughout her narrative is that disapproval from her family.... finally ended in conflict and break-up” (pp. 113, 115). Other than this non-descript example, negative or punitive family responses are more often implied, assumed, or anticipated than explicated in participants’ accounts.

A number of deconversion studies pay little or no attention to family relational dynamics related to a child’s religious change. These studies focus more on cognitive, emotional, and post-religious identity construction processes related to deconversion. In Brent’s (1994) interviews of individuals leaving “Protestant fundamentalism”, for example, the only mention of family involves noting one participant’s feeling of being “left alone by God, by

everybody in the church, by everyone” (p. 5). In Davidman and Greil’s (2007) interviews of individuals who had left Ultra-Orthodox Jewish traditions, the only reference to family involves a participant noting the importance of her daughter’s relationship to her grandparents in spite of the religious differences between the participant and her own parents (p. 211).

Analyses of existing deconversion accounts

The second major focus in deconversion research involves analyses of existing narrative accounts of individuals’ trajectories of religious change. In these studies, data are collected from anthologies or online fora in which individuals have recounted their process of deconversion. Once again, this literature focuses almost exclusively on the perspectives of individuals who have left religion. With few exceptions (Colaner et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2015), these analyses illuminate oppositional family responses or brief, non-descript acknowledgements of family dynamics related to a child’s deconversion (see, for example, Adam, 2009; Chalfant, 2011; Harrold, 2006; Wright et al., 2011).

In Chalfant’s (2011) study of atheist identity formation, the only mention of family dynamics involves an anonymous writer’s expression that, “I might as well told my family I was gay” after disclosing his atheist identity to his family (p. 59). Wright et al. (2011) devote a brief paragraph to family relational health in their analysis of on-line deconversion narratives, noting, “The social costs were especially high when they involved family. One respondent compared revealing his decision to his parents as akin to a gay person ‘coming out’” (p. 11). Adam’s (2009) analysis of “apostasy from fundamentalism” accounts also acknowledges the significance of family relational health in deconversion yet, once again, does so in a non-descript manner, giving little insight into this component of the phenomenon: “Apostates frequently recollect the strength of their social ties within the fundamentalist community and

express regret at the undoing of those ties, which often involve close family and friends” (p. 49).

In the first section of McKnight and Ondrey’s (2008) analysis of online accounts, edited anthologies, and memoirs of deconversion, they provide minimal discussion of family dynamics related to this phenomenon. These instances involve general, anticipated, or “possible rejection by their families and communities” (p. 9) and the recounting of an individual’s grief regarding the loss of faith and social community: “Gone are friends, gone is one’s family” (p. 56).

The minimal attention given to familial dynamics in deconversion interviews and accounts may, in part, be attributable to the constraints of essay or on-line formats. Additionally, these characteristics of deconversion accounts may also be informed by the construction of deconversion as an individually-mediated, cognitively-driven accomplishment, often dependent on reinforcing an oppositional relationship to the rejected religious tradition and its members (Adam, 2009; Bromley, 1998; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fazzino, 2014).

Characteristics of deconversion accounts: An individual and oppositional focus

Deconversion research often yields ambiguous data regarding the relationship between religious change and family relational health. Family dynamics involved in this phenomenon are either absent, allotted a brief, non-descript overview, or connected to an isolated, negative event which often characterizes the family as reactionary and relationally punitive. Though negative responses by family or parents to a child’s rejection of the family’s religious tradition are certainly a part of some individuals’ experiences, an exploration of deconversion account conventions may shed light on reasons for the minimal focus on family in current deconversion research.

In the sociology and psychology of religion, the dominant construction of deconversion relies on intrapersonal and cognitive components of this phenomenon (Adam, 2009; Fazzino, 2014; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, p. 39; Rew, Wong, Torres, & Howell, 2007; Smith & Sikkink, 2003; Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 248; Uecker et al., 2007). In their qualitative study of narrative accounts of ultra-orthodox Jews leaving their religious tradition, for example, Davidman and Greil (2007) note that “most of these respondents do not describe themselves as having become disillusioned after having had a traumatic experience but rather as just being able to see the holes in the worldview that others in their community did not see” (p. 207). Crosby (2007) notes that only 1 of 10 participants “changed religious beliefs due to personal crisis” (p. 231) in his study of individuals exiting their Christian tradition. Similarly, Wright et al. (2011) reports that “intellectual and theological concerns” with doctrine and the biblical text were cited much more often than social trauma, religious hypocrisy, or the negative influence of non-Christians in the individual accounting of deconversion (pp. 6-11). Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) conclude that for their “Amazing Apostates”, “the roots of apostasy usually lay in the religious beliefs themselves, not some hidden underlying cause” (p. 117).

Narrative accounts often construct deconversion as an individually-mediated escape or “accomplishment” (Davidman & Greil, 2007, p. 213; see also Bromley, 1998, Chalfant, 2011, p. 31; Fazzino, 2014; Smith, 2011; Wright et al., 2011). This positioning of the individual-as-overcoming-agent is reflected in narrative accounts that portray deconversion as an escape from confinement (Bromley, 1998; Harrold, 2006), a heroic act (Streib et al., 2009, p. 223), perseverance amidst a significant obstacle (Davidman & Greil, 2007, p. 213), or a means of discovery, autonomy, and personal growth (Davidman & Greil, 2007; McKnight & Ondrey, 2008, p. 46). Just as this individual-as-overcoming-agent narrative account convention relies on a negative portrayal of religion, positioning the individual as a “survivor” or a “victim” (Streib et al., 2009, p. 223) requires a similar characterization: heroic

acts require villains, a discovery of truth infers a move away from falsehood or lies, personal growth implies a previous stagnancy or obstacle, the need to escape suggests previous confinement, survival assumes hardship or a threat to one's wellbeing, and victimization requires a perpetrator (see, for example, Bromley, 1998).

As the decision of most individuals to leave their faith tradition "has little to do with a known destination, the previous, rejected religious identity becomes invaluable capital in the construction of a post-religious identity" (Adam, 2009, p. 46; see also Harrold, 2006). Scholars have suggested that this new identity – initially conflicted or fragmented – is constructed through regular affirmation of ways in which it is in opposition to the rejected system (Bielo, 2011, p. 30; Bromley, 1998; Chalfant, 2011, p. 19; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Harrold, 2006; McKnight & Ondrey, 2008, p. 8; Smith, J., 2011, 2013; also see Schaeffer, 2007, 2011 for the autobiographical use of these conventions).

For the individual who has left religion, post-religious identity is often constructed not only in opposition to the rejected religious tradition but also by the ritualistic recounting of the negative social and emotional consequences of an individual's deconversion (Bromley, 1998; Streib et al., 2009). Negative responses of parents, family or religious leaders (even to the extent of not attending an adult child's wedding or threatening disinheritance) are not difficult to find in both academic and more popular accounts of those who have left religion (Armstrong, 1981; Babinski, 2003; Bromley, 1998; Cameron, 2008; Crosby, 2008; Dann, 2008; Ebaugh, 1988; Schaeffer, 2007, 2011; Winell, 1993). Though deconverts often characterize the religious system they are rejecting as relying heavily on dichotomous, "us versus them" social boundary markers, deconversion accounts often rely on the very "othering" strategies inherent in the recently rejected religious system (Harrold, 2006; see also Pargament, 1997, pp. 201ff; Smith, 2013; Wilkins, 2008 for discussions of insider-outsider distinctions more generally).

The dominant construction of religious deconversion as an individually and cognitively-mediated process often positions family as either insignificant or as an oppositional character in the narrative experience and accounting of deconversion. Though some studies do suggest that family plays a key role in the understanding of this phenomenon, this has been understood almost exclusively from accounts of individuals who have left religion. As such, very little is known about parents' perspectives in the understanding of a child's religious change.

The present study: Parents' experiences of an adult child's religious deconversion

In light of the well-established role of family and parents in children's religious formation and the general efficacy of religious socialization, deconversion presents an intriguing phenomenon in religion and family research. As little is known about the familial impact of deconversion other than the often negative or non-descript family responses depicted in accounts of those who have left religion, the present study explores this phenomenon from parents' perspectives within the context of mainstream evangelical, Protestant religious traditions.

To complement several gaps and limitations in existing family and religious change literature, the present study focuses on the context of a child's deconversion and specific content of familial interactions regarding religious differences. Exploring parents' negotiation of and response to their adult child's religious deconversion, both initially and over time, also begins to address some of the gaps in religion and family research. Further, the present inquiry involves interviewing both mothers and fathers about both sons and daughters who have left the family's religious tradition and focuses on ways that parents' own religiosity informed (or did not inform) their experience and response to their child's deconversion.

The current study also allows for an exploration of the ways in which parents may negotiate their child's deconversion in relationally-informed ways that may be in conflict with evangelical expectations of faith-keeping. Parents' accounts of what led to and to

what/whom they attributed their child's deconversion are also considered. Finally, the present study explores how parents negotiate a balance between values of faith-keeping, facilitating a child's autonomy, and maintaining the parent-child relationship amidst familial religious differences.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Rationale

The present study explored several potential tensions between competing family and faith values for parents whose child has left the family's evangelical, Protestant tradition. First, the value of faith-keeping describes the importance of the successful transmission of religious faith from parent to child (Chaves, 2011, p. 90; Dollahite et al., 2017; Putnam and Campbell, 2010, p. 11). This value of intergenerational religious transmission is reinforced through the use of biblical texts and is understood largely as a sacred parental and, to a lesser extent, congregational or institutional responsibility. Smith (1998) observes: "Indeed, it appears that, for evangelical parents, having one's children grow up to leave the faith is considered one of the greatest potential tragedies of life" (p. 50).

Second, maintaining a high quality parent-child relationship is upheld as a key factor in the successful transmission of religious belief and practice, reinforced by both academic and religious perspectives on religious socialization (Desmond et al., 2010; Dyck, 2010a; Godina, 2014; Hardy et al., 2011; Kinnaman, 2011; Leonard et al., 2012; Petts, 2009; Rienow, 2011; Schwartz, 2006). A child's deconversion may precipitate increased parent-child conflict and decreased parent-relationship quality which, as discussed above, may then decrease the efficacy of a child's religious socialization.

Existing research exploring religious change in the context of family focuses almost exclusively on those who have chosen to leave their family's religious tradition. Parents' accounts of a child's deconversion provides a valuable perspective in understanding the familial and relational impact of this phenomenon.

Study design

This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews followed by participants' completion of quantitative measures of religious belief and practice. The present research gave primacy to the qualitative data while utilizing the quantitative data for supplemental

demographic and contextual knowledge related to the study participants (Bryman, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, pp. 64-65). The initial fixed, sequential, independent mixed methods design proposed the use of quantitative data to “categorize” participants into groups of “low” versus “high” religious attendance, private religious practice, and doctrinal orthodoxy, for example. These participant groupings were to be utilized for purposes of comparison and contrast with themes generated from the qualitative data. Contrary to the original study design, the measures of religious belief and practice provided supplemental demographic information about the study participants but did not yield results amenable to grouping or categorizing participants.

Interpretive description

This study used interpretive description to guide the qualitative design. Interpretive description is a discipline-informed “research design logic” (Thorne, 2008, p. 27) driven by the need to construct knowledge relevant for applied disciplinary practice (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). This approach is predicated on naturalistic inquiry which assumes relativist, multiple, and socially-constructed understandings of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, pp. 12-15; Thorne, 2016, pp. 36-38; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004, p. 5). Thorne (2008) notes that interpretive description research

[r]ecognize[s] that, in the world of human experience, “reality” involves multiple constructed realities that may well be contradictory, and ... acknowledge[s] an inseparable relationship between the knower and the known, such that the inquirer and the “object” of that inquiry interact to influence one another. (p. 74)

Interpretive description seeks to identify themes related to individuals’ experience of a common phenomenon and provide an interpretive account of these themes which is achieved, in part, by exploring and seeking out accounts which may depart from these themes. This pragmatic approach underlies an “investigation of a clinical phenomenon of interest to the discipline for the purpose of capturing themes and patterns within subjective

perceptions and generating an interpretive description capable of informing clinical understanding” (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 5; see also Thorne, 2010). Thorne (2010) suggests that within applied (versus theoretical) disciplinary contexts, interpretive description functions as a method to address issues and problems of practice. Regarding the differences between theoretical and applied disciplines, she observes that

essentially social scientists are interested in health issues as an opportunity to study some expression of the human psychological, social, or cultural essence that is the core business of their discipline. Health professional researchers, however, study problems primarily in order to solve them. (p. 5)

Though interpretive description has been used primarily in the nursing discipline, other interdisciplinary and health-related disciplines (such as counselling psychology) have increasingly utilized this applied approach (Hunt, 2009; Maltby, 2006; Muscat, 2010; Williams, 2011). In light of the important role of religion in family relational health, the applied, clinical focus of interpretive description aligns well the study of religious deconversion in the context of family.

Data collection

Sampling

Convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling were all proposed as approaches to recruit 20-25 participants. This sample size was determined by acknowledging the broad “scope” of the research question (the experiences of parents whose child has left a mainstream evangelical, Protestant tradition), the sensitive “nature of the topic”, and the potentially limited ability or willingness of participants to “describe their experiences well” (Mayan, 2009, pp. 63-64; see also Corbin & Morse, 2003). As the present study cast a relatively wide net, explored a sensitive topic area or experience, and addressed an understudied research area, 20 to 25 participants was determined to be an “above average” sample size range within interpretive description research (Thorne, 2008, pp. 94-97). Despite

the recruitment challenges (discussed below), parents who agreed to participate in the present study described their experiences with a high level of reflection and articulation.

Drawing from the extant literature on family and religious change, purposive sampling methods were initially proposed to explore accounts of a child's deconversion that reflected diverse dynamics potentially related to participants

- of both genders whose children, of both genders, have left the family's religious tradition (Roer-Strier & Sands, 2001, 2004; Roer-Strier et al., 2009; Sands & Roer-Strier, 2004)
- whose children have left recently as well as parents whose children left the family's religious tradition some time ago
- whose child's religious departure coincided with a child's significant lifestyle change or life event (Freedman, 2008; Lease & Shulman, 2003)
- from a variety of mainstream evangelical, Protestant congregations/denominations and reporting diverse levels of religious orientation and/or orthodoxy

The present study recruited 21 participants through convenience and adapted snowball sampling approaches. Though all participants were asked to consider passing along my contact information to other individuals who might have experience with this phenomenon, no participants were recruited through this traditional snowball sampling approach.

Increasingly, "adaptations of the snowball sampling strategy" have been proposed and utilized to recruit research participants within "hard-to-reach" populations (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010, p. 369; see also Handcock & Gile, 2011). These approaches involve the role of individuals involved in community groups or the researcher's social network, for example, to assist in recruitment efforts (Browne, 2005; Sadler et al., 2010). As opposed to typical or traditional definitions of "snowball sampling", these individuals are not necessarily study participants.

In the current study, convenience and an adapted snowball sampling approaches facilitated the recruitment of participants whose accounts reflected the dynamics in the first 3 bullet points (above) as well as a range of denominational affiliations; as discussed below, however, participants' reported levels of religious practices, orientation, and theological orthodoxy showed a high level of homogeneity.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

The present study utilized the following inclusion criteria:

- 1) Parents who currently identified themselves as evangelical, Protestant Christians;
- 2) Parents who currently identified themselves as affiliated with and/or involved in an evangelical, Protestant Christian tradition;
- 3) Participants who identified themselves as "a parent whose child has left the family's religious tradition";
- 4) Parents whose child was at least 19 years of age at the time of the interview;
- 5) Parents who spoke English.

All participants completed a demographic form (see Appendix F) and sent it to me electronically prior to the interview. This form ensured that all participants met inclusion criteria 1 through 4; English language proficiency was determined based upon initial phone conversations and electronic correspondence preceding the interview. Participants' ages were not requested on the demographic form; current age(s) of the child(ren) who had left the family's religious tradition was/were requested on the demographic form.

In both the recruitment materials and the semi-structured interview protocol, definitions of the words "left" and "religious" were not provided. This decision was based on assumptions that parents' own understandings of these terms may be an important consideration in their accounts and definitions of a child's deconversion. The third inclusion criterion (above) was, thus, dependent on participants' subjective definitions of "left" and "religious" tradition. Similarly, participants were not asked when their child's deconversion

had occurred or how much time had elapsed since a child's deconversion. This decision was intended to acknowledge that parents' accounts of a child's deconversion may be difficult to define and may include "gradual" versus "sudden" deconversion trajectories.

Recruitment

As per regional phone and online directories, I identified 45 local churches fitting a mainstream evangelical, Protestant denomination. Drawing from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (2008) listing of "evangelical Protestant churches" (pp. 169-171), these included (but were not limited to) Baptist, Church of God, community, Seventh-Day Adventist, Mennonite Brethren, Bible, Pentecostal, Vineyard, Evangelical Free, and Church of the Nazarene as well as other independent churches and denominations.

Recruitment efforts commenced with a number of convenience sampling approaches. Upon receiving institutional Behavioural Research Ethics Board approval, I contacted a number of individuals with whom I had a previous or ongoing personal or professional connection. Three of these individuals consented to participate. Initial recruitment also involved meeting with local pastors (with whom I had an affiliation) to discuss the possibility of apprising their congregation of the study. Several local pastors agreed to post information about the study in their church building and/or website, contact specific members about the study, or disseminate study information during weekend services. In my interactions with local pastors with whom I had no previous affiliation, these recruitment strategies often involved church leadership board approval, review of study materials by a church board member, and personal correspondence with me about the intentions of the study. Six participants from 3 different churches were recruited through these approaches.

In this stage of recruitment, I connected with 32 local churches. In total, 7 local churches agreed to post information about the study. Initial recruitment efforts also involved requesting that study information be posted in local coffee shops. Seventeen of 22 of these

establishments agreed to post advertising materials (included in Appendix G). No individuals contacted the researcher about study participation as a result of these recruitment efforts.

A second stage of recruitment involved expanding the geographical borders of the study. This decision was based on inadequate participant numbers (and not as a result of purposive sampling to pursue diverse participant accounts or “contrary cases”). I contacted 12 large, mainstream evangelical churches and para-church organizations in other communities. There was minimal response to these efforts though one individual consented to participate upon hearing about the study from her pastor.

A third stage of recruitment included an adapted snowball sampling strategy as well as a formal media release. Five participants agreed to participate in the study after being contacted by either my professional colleagues or family members (none of whom were study participants). These efforts were not precipitated by a request on my part but by these individuals’ interest in the study as well as knowledge of the recruitment difficulties inherent in this sensitive topic area. Six participants consented to participate in response to a media release from my institution’s Media Relations department. A local radio station as well as an online news site both highlighted the release.

In the letters of introduction and general advertising materials sent, with permission, to individuals, pastors, and other religious leaders, my institutional email address was provided. In formal correspondence directed to pastors and leaders, letters of introduction included

- a “permission to contact” form (in which an interested participant could provide the completed form to their pastor to pass along to me; included in Appendix D),
- a study overview and format (e.g., length of semi-structured interviews),
- informed consent information (included in Appendix E),
- ethics information (third party support options, right to withdraw, and contact information for my supervisor).

After the consent form had been in the possession of the participant for at least 24 hours and informed consent had been obtained, I discussed possible meeting locations that would be most comfortable for the participant.

Qualitative data collection

I conducted 22 interviews with 21 participants over a 14 month data collection period. A follow-up interview was conducted with one of the participants. Eight interviews were conducted in participants' homes, 6 at my work office, 1 (via telephone) at my supervisor's lab, 3 at participants' churches, 2 at local restaurants/coffee shops, and 2 at participants' work offices.

No participants chose to withdraw from the study after commencing with the interview or before/after completing the quantitative measures. One individual, after requesting that he and his spouse be interviewed together, did not return my correspondence confirming that this could be facilitated. Another participant, months after being interviewed, requested a time to provide an update on her child's circumstances. I offered an additional interview but this request was not responded to.

I conducted all interviews face-to-face with the exception of one interview which was completed and audio recorded over the phone. Most participants were interviewed for one and a half hours. A few interviews were completed in just under/over an hour; several interviews were over 2 hours in length. One participant's spouse was present during the interview. His spouse did not consent to formally participate in the study and though her input was audio recorded, it was not transcribed or included in the data analysis.

At the completion of the first interview, participants were asked if they would be willing to consider a follow-up interview if necessary; all participants agreed to this. Due to the richness, complexity, and length of the initial interviews as well as data collection time constraints, only one follow-up interview was conducted.

Open-ended questions (included in Appendix A) focused on parents' initial responses to, subsequent processing of, and attributions related to their child's deconversion. Prompts or follow-up sub-questions were often asked to address a more specific aspect of the interview protocol. With participants' permission, the semi-structured interviews were all audio recorded to ensure accuracy of participants' accounts. In the days following an interview, I emailed the participant to thank them for their perspective and willingness to be a part of the study. Participants were also sent a follow-up package which included a card and 25 dollar gift card in appreciation and acknowledgment of their time.

Quantitative data

Participants completed a brief battery of quantitative measures (included in Appendix B) to provide information about parents' background, beliefs and values related to religious orientation, practice, and doctrinal orthodoxy. Table 1 provides reliability and validity coefficients for these scales. Most participants sent me completed measures electronically or via post in the days following the semi-structured interview. Other participants completed the measures immediately after the interview and several participants sent me the completed measures electronically several months after the interview (as a result of a follow-up request).

Table 1*Quantitative Measures*

Measure	Subscales*	Number of Items	Reliability	Validity	Scoring Range	Categories
I-E Revised	Intrinsic	8	0.83 ^a - 0.86 ^b		8-40	24-40 on I; 6-18 on E
	Extrinsic	6	0.65 ^a - 0.66 ^b		6-30	18-30 on E; 8-24 on I
Quest		12	0.75 - 0.82 ^c	0.85 - 0.90 ^d	12-108	12-36: low; 84-108: high
DUREL			0.78 - 0.91 ^e	0.71 - 0.86 ^e		
	Attendance	1			1-6	1-3: irregular; 4-6: regular
	Private activity	1			1-6	1-4: infrequent; 5-6: frequent
Orthodoxy		6	0.69 - 0.74 ^f		-18 to 18	-18 to -9: low; 9-18: high
Doctrinal Orthodoxy		12	0.91 ^g		12-108	12-36: low; 84-108: high

* for these measures, subscales are not summed to calculate a total score

^a Gorsuch & McPherson (1989)

^b Tiliopoulos, Bikker, Coxon, & Hawkin (2007)

^c Batson & Schoenrade (1991)

^d correlation levels with Batson & Ventis' (1982) original 6 item scale

^e Koenig & Büssing (2010)

^f Hunsberger (1989)

^g Batson et al. (1993)

The quantitative measures included the revised version of Allport and Ross's (1967) original religious orientation scale measuring domains related to an individual's intrinsic (or "ends" oriented) religious involvement and extrinsic (or "means" oriented) religious involvement (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). The extrinsic items on the *Revised Intrinsic-Extrinsic Scale* capture both (and differentiate between) social and individual subsets of extrinsic religious orientation (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989). In the present study, this measure was included to acknowledge the potential relationship between participants' religious orientation and understandings of truth, morality, and salvation and/or dynamics related to the protective health factors and influence of a pro-social community.

The *New Quest Scale* (which expands upon Batson and Ventis' (1982) original six-item scale) was designed "to measure the degree to which an individual's religion involves an open-ended, responsive dialogue with existential questions raised by the contradictions and tragedies of life" (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991, p. 431). This scale includes items intended to measure an individual's "readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity", "self-criticism and perception of religious doubt as positive", and "openness to change" (p. 436). This scale was included to explore the extent to which parents' understanding of the role of religious questions and doubts related to their experience of their own child's religious change. Two items from the *Duke University Religion Index* ("How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?" and "How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation or Bible study?") were used as measures of parental institutional and private religious expression (Koenig & Büssing, 2010, p. 78).

The 6 item *Short Christian Orthodoxy* (SCO) scale (Hunsberger, 1989) utilized in the present study was revised from Fullerton and Hunsberger's (1982) original 24 item *Christian Orthodoxy* (CO) scale. The items selected for the short version address key components of theological tenets within Christian traditions – namely, "the divinity of Christ, inspiration of the

Bible, the concept of God as superstition, forgiveness of sin, God's awareness of human actions, and the resurrection" (Hunsberger, 1989, p. 361). This scale was used to assess participants' levels of assent to orthodox Christian doctrines potentially connected to parents' concerns about a child's rejection of the exclusive source of truth and salvation, for example.

Additionally, 12 items from the *Doctrinal Orthodoxy Scale* (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993) were included to supplement the SCO items related to orthodox theological beliefs in Christian traditions. The *Doctrinal Orthodoxy Scale* items capture levels of theological assent to a personal God, biblical authority, the person and role of Jesus Christ, the "second coming" of Christ, the existence of a spiritual realm, and the afterlife.

Use of the quantitative data

The initial study design proposed grouping participants into categories based on the quantitative data and then comparing and contrasting these groups with the qualitative data themes. Due to the homogeneity of reported levels of religious attendance, practice, orientation, and orthodoxy, however, participant groupings were unable to be constructed. As such, the use of the quantitative measures provided contextual and demographic information about the study participants. Table 1 (above) outlines the scoring ranges for each measure that were originally proposed to be utilized to construct participant categories.

For the *Revised Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale*, I constructed participant groupings based on Allport and Ross' (1967) original typologies. Hunter & Merrill (2013) recently utilized these categories in their study of religion and health in an adult population, explaining that

Intrinsically religious individuals were classified in this study as those whose intrinsic scale scores are equal to or above the scale's midpoint and whose extrinsic scale scores are below the scale's midpoint.... Extrinsically religious individuals were classified as those whose extrinsic scale scores are equal to or above the scale's midpoint and whose intrinsic scale scores are below the scale's midpoint. (p. 854)

For the *New Quest Scale*, I categorized participants scoring in the bottom quartile (12-36) and top quartile (84-108) as “low” and “high” quest, respectively.

For the first *DUREL* scale item, I categorized participants scoring 1 to 3 and 4 to 6 as “irregular” and “regular” attendees, respectively. For the second item, participants scoring 1 to 4 and 5 to 6 were categorized as “infrequent” and “frequent” private religious activity, respectively. These groupings sought to reflect the value and norm of “weekly attendance” and “daily devotions”, for example, within evangelical, Protestant traditions (Bibby, 2011, pp. 17, 37).

For the *Short Christian Orthodoxy Scale*, I categorized participants scoring in the bottom quartile (-18 to -9) and the top quartile (9 to 18) as “low” and “high” orthodoxy, respectively. Though derived from the long form of this scale (*Christian Orthodoxy*; Fullerton and Hunsberger, 1982), Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) grouped participants using the top and bottom quartile scores in their study of conversion and deconversion. Similarly, I categorized participants scoring in the bottom quartile (12 to 36) and the top quartile (84 to 108) of the *Doctrinal Orthodoxy Scale* as “low” and “high” orthodoxy, respectively.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interview data was transcribed, checked for accuracy against the digital recording, de-identified, and entered into NVivo 9™ for analysis. I transcribed seven interviews; approved research lab members (who signed contracts of confidentiality) transcribed the remaining interviews. I checked all transcripts against the audio recording to ensure accuracy of transcription.

As interpretive description allows for a variety of qualitative data analysis techniques (Thorne, 2008), constant comparative analysis was used to facilitate comparisons across categories of interest. Analysis commenced after the first interview (as opposed to analysis beginning when all data have been gathered). Parents’ perspectives of their adult child’s religious deconversion were explored through the constant comparison of themes and data

from the qualitative interviews, demographic information (e.g. gender), and quantitative measures of religious practice, orientation, and orthodoxy.

Constant comparative analysis

Constant comparison analysis (CCA) was originally introduced as a method within grounded theory inquiry (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and scholars have increasingly argued for its applicability outside of grounded theory research (Fram, 2013). Glaser (1965) suggests that if the researcher

wishes only to generate theoretical ideas – new concepts and their properties, hypotheses and interrelated hypotheses – the analysis cannot usefully be confined to the practice of coding first and then analyzing the data, since the analyst, in direct pursuit of his purpose, is constantly redesigning and reintegrating his theoretical notions as he reviews. (p. 437).

Though theory generation is not the goal of the present interpretive description study, Glaser (1965) notes that CCA facilitates theoretical knowledge through “the reformulation of hypotheses and redefinition of the phenomenon forced by constantly confronting the theory with negative cases” (p. 438). Similarly, the use of CCA within interpretive description involves comparison “of every piece of data (an interview, a statement, a theme) with all others that may be similar or different from it in order to theorize all possible relations” (Thorne, 2008, p. 151). Bazeley (2013) suggests that constant comparative analysis considers “various possible meanings of words by imaginatively comparing them with others that might have been used; to compare incident against incident for similarities and differences; to consider opposites and extremes...” (p. 255).

The utilization of this method facilitates an understanding of a phenomenon which “corresponds closely to the data, since the constant comparisons force consideration of much diversity in the data” (Glaser, 1965, p. 444). Considering the similarity or difference of each “incident” to all other incidents/categories contrasts with “coding for crude proofs, which

only establishes whether or not an incident indicates the few properties of the category which are being counted" (p. 444). Within interpretive description, Thorne (2008) addresses a similar point in her discussion of "misinterpreting frequency" (p. 156). Just as a high frequency of something in the data set may not indicate relevance or importance, one "particularly graphic instance of a thing" does not suggest it must happen often or be found elsewhere in the data. Conversely, Thorne (2008) reminds the researcher to avoid the assumption that "because you haven't seen something, it doesn't exist" (p. 157).

Stage 1: Comparing incidents

Glaser (1965; see also Glaser & Strauss, 1967) outlines four stages involved in a constant comparative method of analysis. The first is described as "comparing incidents applicable to each category" whereby "the analyst starts by coding each incident in his data in as many categories of analysis as possible" (p. 439). In the present study, familiarization with the data involved my transcribing, reading, and making "observational and casual rather than systematic" margin notes or memos (Braun & Clark, 2012, p. 61; see also Bazeley, 2013, pp. 102ff).

The coding of initial transcripts focused on larger themes such as "*nature and goals of religion*" versus more specific or nuanced themes. Additionally, units of text were often coded in multiple categories as the categories were broad at this point. Thorne (2008) suggests that with interpretive description inquiry, "it is quite important not to be derailed by excessive precision in your early coding" (p. 145; see also Thorne et al., 2004, p. 10). When the first interview transcript was complete, my supervisor and I independently reviewed the transcript, made theoretical and coding-related notes, and then compared these initial observations. I then open-coded the first 3 interview transcripts and generated 34 codes. Informed by an initial analysis of how these codes related to each other, how they related to the research questions, and field notes/reflexive journal entries related to the next 3 transcribed (though not yet coded) interviews, a total of 50 codes/subcodes were

generated and grouped under general categories relating to the research questions. This coding framework was used by my supervisor and me to independently code the third interview transcript. We then compared our results and discussed the limitations of the coding framework and how these issues could be addressed.

At this stage, I also entered margin notes or memos reflecting questions and possible connections to other codes. The following is an example of one of these early memos:

In most of the accounts thus far, parents' definitions of a child's religious change have been based largely on explicit and intentional communication between parent and child - sometimes initiated by the child, sometimes by the parent. Perhaps parents that are less certain of a child's religious identity would self-select out of the study but, going into the study, I assumed that more parents' definitions of deconversion would be constructed through less concrete observations stemming from lack of church attendance, living in a common-law relationship, or substance use, for example.

Glaser (1965) suggests that “*while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents coded in the same category*” (p. 439, emphases in original). Once a category has been coded several times, the researcher should “*stop coding and record a memo or ideas*” in order to reflect on how these coded data connect to the category (p. 440, emphases in original). The practice of “memoing” assists in bringing clarity to the category as well as providing documentation or an “audit trail” of decisions made in relation to the data (Bazeley, 2013, p. 407). Glaser (1965) notes that this is a point at which it is useful to have a co-researcher give input to developing ideas.

Along these lines, I generated a coding framework incorporating all the open codes from the first 6 transcripts. The first and third participant transcripts were then independently coded by my supervisor and me utilizing this framework. Upon review of the coding decisions that had been independently completed, there was a high level of agreement

between my and my supervisor's coding decisions. Areas of less consensus precipitated discussion of how the existing categories should be differentiated, distilled, clarified, expanded, or, as noted below, integrated to better capture components of participants' accounts.

Stage 2: Integrating categories

The second stage of CCA involves "integrating categories and their properties" (Glaser, 1965, p. 440). As an increasing amount of data is available and coded, "the constant comparative units change *from* comparison of incident with incident *to* incident with properties of the category which resulted from initial comparison of incidents" (p. 440, emphases in original). As analysis progresses, the "accumulated knowledge of a property of the category – because of constant comparison – readily starts to become integrated; that is, related in many diverse ways, resulting in a unified whole" (p. 440). To integrate categories and their properties, I generated descriptions of several codes in order to clarify the scope of a particular theme and/or differentiate it from other codes. The following is an example of one such description. Phrases in bold denote titles of other codes at that particular point in the analysis:

"A child's previous religious expression":

*This code relates to **how important religion was to family identity** and likely does not need to be differentiated from **parents' acceptance of a child's decision** as this latter code reflects parents' perspective of the extent to which their child's pre-deconversion religious identity was/was not a nominal affair. When a child has previously enacted seemingly authentic and comprehensive Christian belief and practice, this code is related to parents' **shock or incredulity** and/or **acknowledgement of the difficulty their child** had in making the decision to leave religion and/or disclose this; for parents who express that their child had a more detached relationship to matters of Christian faith, this code is often tied to a child's*

***natural disposition** and/or the **inefficacy/irrelevancy of religion**. This code may also be tied to issues of **salvation** and **eternal security** in which upholding a child's previous religious commitment and/or expression is connected to soteriological understandings of "once saved, always saved".*

To continue the analytic integration of "categories and their properties", I constructed a final coding framework based on the coding and written summaries of the first 8 completed interviews. This framework was expanded to 65 codes/subcodes grouped under 7 general categories related to the research questions. At this stage of the analysis, some coding overlap between categories was left undifferentiated to ensure that initial coding approaches/observations would not be lost in the analysis of subsequent data. This coding framework along with a summary of preliminary analysis was provided to my supervisor and supervisory committee to elicit feedback. Incorporating this feedback, I recoded the first 3 as well as all subsequent interview transcripts. Throughout this process, minor clarifications/additions were made to the coding framework based on interview data as well as field notes/reflexive journal entries.

As coding progresses within an interpretive description inquiry, shifting between themes and codes assists in determining and clarifying the relationship between these levels of data analysis. At this stage, Thorne (2008) suggests moving from analyzing "pieces" of data to patterns and then from patterns to relationships (pp. 142-149). Similarly, Bazeley (2013) advises, "Work back and forth through the various data sources, giving each the benefit of its individual perspective, but also placing each in the context of the growing whole" (p. 15).

Stages 3 and 4: Delimiting and writing the "theory"

Though the present research is not a grounded theory or theory-confirming inquiry, the third and fourth stages of CCA involve "delimiting the theory" and "writing the theory" (Glaser, 1965, pp. 441, 443). In the present study, clarifying each code and its properties

and writing the interpretive description of the phenomenon involved ensuring the distinctiveness of each theme (Bazeley, 2013, p. 185). Once all transcribed interviews had been coded, I reviewed all excerpts coded under each category to ensure that content accurately reflected the definition and scope of the category. Additionally, I reread all interview transcripts following the completion of the first Findings chapter draft to confirm that *data corpus* codes and categories reflected the salient themes in participants' individual accounts.

In addition to these constant comparative methods, data analysis involved the use of field notes I completed after the qualitative interviews had been conducted. Field notes were not coded as a part of the data analysis process but served to record contextual information and other impressions to assist in the ongoing documentation of my decisions relating to the data.

Trustworthiness/rigor

As the present research assigned primacy and priority to the qualitative data generated from participants' accounts, validity within qualitative inquiry centers on the relationship of the researcher to the participants and to decisions involved in the construction and analysis of data. In qualitative research, terms such as "trustworthiness", "authenticity", and "rigor" are used to describe considerations in establishing research validity (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, pp. 120-121; Torrance, 2011, p. 582). In the present study, a number of steps were taken to address these components of validity in qualitative inquiry.

Representative credibility

To ensure that data accurately reflected participants' experiences and accounts, sufficient time was allotted to the interview process and probing/follow-up questions were posed to clarify and confirm participants' intentions and meanings. Representative credibility was also addressed through the generation of codes and themes which relied on participants' words and phrases in order to ensure the primacy of participants' narrative

accounts (Bazeley, 2013, pp. 166-167). Most of the code/theme headings and subheadings presented in the Findings chapter, for example, incorporate participants' verbatim phrases.

Trustworthiness was also tied to the consideration of "contrary cases" or "outliers" in the data. This analytic posture precipitated questions such as "What might I not be seeing?" and "What else might there be to see and how would I know that?" (Thorne, 2008, p. 160). Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (2011) explain that the

scrupulous researcher looks suspiciously at his own observations, asking where he might have applied his own biases and interpretations instead of those generated from the actual behaviors, interactions, words, and sentiments of his participants She is constantly challenging the very explanations and interpretations she is putting forward. (p. 220)

Once again, the Findings chapter includes "contrary cases" of participants whose accounts of a particular dynamic or theme departed from most other accounts. In spite of most participants refuting "rebellion" deconversion trajectories or the influence of Christian "hypocrisy", for example, a number of parents did uphold these influences in a child's religious change. Though most parents recounted experiences of isolation or judgement from their faith community, one participant discussed the high levels of support and acceptance he received from his religious peers and leaders. Almost without exception, parents affirmed the accepting and relationally-affirming ways that they had responded to their child's deconversion; the Findings chapter, however, also notes ways that parents' persuasive interactions, ongoing hints or "*digs*", or the leading of a grandchild through the process of conversion, for example, may not have been perceived by their adult children as relationally-healthy approaches to familial religious differences.

Field notes

In the present study, trustworthiness and rigor were also ensured through field notes that I completed after the interviews in order to contextualize the interview setting.

Additionally, these notes served to document theoretical impressions of the interview as a time lag often existed between conducting the interview and transcription. The following excerpt is taken from my field note entry after completing the first interview:

August 11, 2015

This interview provided insight into a number of the theoretical “hunches” and personal experiences that motivated me to pursue this research in the first place and have guided my studies in the last few years. These first interview themes feel “dangerous” in that I’m worried that they reinforce my hunches and agenda too compellingly and too early in the process. In my initial excitement, I don’t want to exclude other accounts and themes that might depart from this and reflect a more oppositional discourse between parents and children, the religious and the “no longer” religious.

The use of field notes also served to document my rationale for asking certain follow-up questions and not asking other questions. These notes reflected on how a semi-structured interview protocol and a prior connection to a participant, for example, likely constrained and facilitated knowledge. Additionally, field notes documented potentially important exchanges that often occurred before the audio was turned on or after it was turned off. These field notes also highlighted moments of my self-doubt, frustration, and impatience regarding the research process – examples and acknowledgement of how the subjective self informs the construction and analysis of data in qualitative research.

November 15, 2015

Unfortunately, the most relevant data seemed to be shared before and after the audio was turned on. The fact that his child was rarely discussed for two hours of recorded interaction is both frustrating and somewhat baffling. As my supervisor reminded me, the things a participant doesn’t offer or say (or when they say it and when they don’t) is telling and may be important data in the understanding of the phenomenon.

I'm confused as to what much of the previous two hours were about. I am certainly open to the possibility that I was bestowed with a riddle that I now have the task to solve.

My field notes also included acknowledgement of participant interactions which highlighted gaps in limitations in the design and focus of the present study.

July 8, 2016

This was really the first time I've questioned the gender component not being pursued in this study: the son's lack of spiritual headship in his family was of grave and even eternal concern for this participant and I wonder if this would hold true if her daughter was the one who had enacted a religious change. Interestingly, this participant also portrayed her son's wife as very passive in simply following her husband's lead.

Reflective journal

As rigor is also a function of researcher positioning and reflexivity in relation to the phenomenon of interest, I took steps to make explicit my assumptions and values related to the phenomenon of inquiry (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 274; Horsburgh, 2003, p. 308). Ponterotto (2005) suggests, "The researcher should acknowledge, describe, and 'bracket' his or her values, but not eliminate them" (p. 131). In the present study, this component of trustworthiness and rigor involved consultation with my supervisory committee as well as engagement in reflective journaling to acknowledge and challenge my assumptions, hunches, and decisions related to the data.

A reflective journal was utilized to record my impressions, reactions, and ideas related to the interview process and interactions with participants in order to document my subjective role and influence. Cho & Trent (2006) state that "our notion of 'validity as a process' can be equated with a reflective journal that makes transparent the subjective process now made explicit for research consumers" (p. 32). In addition to an earlier project

exploring my own religious change (Wiebe, 2015) and positioning myself in relation to the present study, my reflective journal entries explored a number of dynamics related to my role in the research. The following entry illustrates, for example, how my own parents' response to my religious change provided the impetus for the present study; this entry also reflects on how my experiences informed my initial assumptions about the research.

August 10, 2015

My parents' calm, reflective, and supportive approach was an unsettling (and disappointing) surprise. In many ways, this was the impetus for the research – my parents' response to my disclosure in no way met my expectations of and need for an oppositional reaction to feel that my deconversion was legitimate. It's important to acknowledge that my experience does not reflect all experiences.

In qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness and rigor also involves acknowledgement of the opposite direction of subjective influence – namely, how the research process and, in particular, interactions with study participants influences the researcher. Ponterotto (2005) writes that qualitative researchers “will likely keep a reflective journal noting the emotional impact of the interview process on themselves” (p. 132; see also Mayan, 2009, pp. 111-112). To this end, a number of my reflective journal entries explored the personal impact that interactions and interviews with parents had; these excerpts also acknowledged how personal and professional domains of the self are always intertwined in qualitative inquiry.

June 20, 2016

This participant's authenticity was also reflected in her questioning of how she could pray for me at the end of the interview. I was caught off-guard but I requested wisdom to not react to my own children based on fear for their future and to not give them the message that they don't measure up or that I'm disappointed in them. As I was being prayed for, I did not feel awkward. I connected with ways in which I missed my religious tradition and community. It was a moment of again wondering if I made

an ill-advised, ignorant, self-absorbed, premature decision to leave religion in such a categorical, explicit way.

This weekend, my nine year old daughter and I talked about my research and why I had trouble going to church. I am inspired that she can maturely and successfully identify as a Christian yet hold the exclusivist extremes of Christian theology at bay – a tension I was, embarrassingly, never able to negotiate. What a mess I’ve made of this.

Reporting and the use of numbers

The reporting of study results is also a component of trustworthiness and rigor. For qualitative research, the presentation of experiences, themes, and patterns using numerical frequencies, however, can be problematic. As discussed above, “misinterpreting frequency” (Thorne, 2008, p. 156) in qualitative inquiry can involve over-attributing importance to a high frequency of a theme or, conversely, over-attributing the importance of one “particularly graphic instance of a thing” (p. 156; see Sandelowski, 2001, p. 234).

In the present study, the Findings and Discussion chapters utilize non-integral (e.g., “few”, “some”, “several” or “many”) descriptors of thematic frequencies instead of stating the number of participants who noted a particular theme. As outlined below, this non-numerical approach aligns with the methodology of the current study despite the important role the use of numbers can have in qualitative research reporting. Maxwell (2010), for example, notes that the use of numbers to state similarities and differences within a particular research setting or group of participants can support a study’s “internal generalizability” (p. 478). Similarly, the use of numbers in qualitative inquiry can “facilitate pattern recognition” (Sandelowski, Voils, & Knafl, 2009, p. 21). More generally, Neale, Miller, and West (2014) suggest that the use of numbers “can improve the transparency of data analysis”, “give precision to statements”, “enable patterns in the data to emerge with greater clarity”, and “increase the meaning of key findings by providing focus” (p. 175).

Despite these advantages, the reporting of qualitative findings using raw numbers can be problematic. On a philosophical level, it is argued that the use of numbers is more commensurate with representing “variables and correlations” than “events and processes” (Maxwell, 2010, p. 477). Methodologically, stating numerical frequencies can erroneously infer a “greater generality for the conclusions than is justified” (p. 479).

In the present study, the semi-structured nature of the interview protocol was an important factor in the decision not to report findings using numerical frequencies. The “minimally structured and open-ended interviewing style” often utilized in qualitative inquiry in general and in the present study in particular “makes it more likely that qualitative data sets will not be directly comparable with each other in the quantitative sense” (p. 217). Similarly, Neale et al. (2014) state, “if not everyone has been asked exactly the same questions in the same way, reporting or alluding to the frequency of a given response or emergent theme will probably misrepresent the data, even within the sample studied” (175).

The use of numbers in qualitative data can, problematically, imply whether a theme was “present” or “absent” in a participant’s account. Sandelowski et al. (2009) outline how numerical statements of “present” or “absent” are, in qualitative inquiry, largely a function of researcher-participant subjectivities:

Present in interview data, among other options, may mean “it” (a) spontaneously came up in discussion, (b) was directed to come up in discussion, (c) was seen by the analyst between the lines, and (d) truly was a dimension of experience. *Absent* may, among other options, mean that “it” (a) did not come up, (b) was not seen by the analyst, (c) was forgotten as a factor by the participant, (d) was thought by the participant to be so understood as to not require bringing it up, (e) was a factor, but the participant did not want to bring “it” up, (f) was not brought up because the conversation veered away from “it”, and (g) truly was not a dimension of experience. (p. 217, emphases mine)

The current study utilized a semi-structured interview style in which unique follow-up questions were posed to participants depending on the direction of the interview and specific researcher-participant interactions requiring clarification or expansion. These methodological subjectivities as well as the nature of the research phenomenon (as event, experience, and process-oriented) informed the non-numerical reporting of frequencies in the following chapters. The use of qualifiers such as “many”, “several”, and “few”, for example, reflect these reporting decisions; additionally, the absence of such qualifiers in the following chapters (e.g., “participants discussed...”) is not equated with “all participants” having discussed a particular theme.

Ethics

In the present study, application and approval from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board as well as consultation with my supervisory committee as ethical issues arose ensured adherence to formal ethical standards. Additionally, ethical practices such as confirming initial and ongoing informed consent, freedom to withdraw, fairness and equity, and the protection of data and identifying information were followed (Thorne, 2008, pp. 113-115, 122, 136). More specifically, physical data was stored in a locked file cabinet and the electronic data were stored on secure servers and password-protected devices.

Ethical adherence also included consideration of participants' wellbeing throughout the interview process. The interview protocol was flexible enough to be delayed, to switch topics, or be terminated. During a number of interviews, participants experienced a high level of emotion related to the research topic. At this point, I expressed that the participant could take his or her time, change subjects, or take a break from the interview process. In these situations, all participants chose to continue the interview.

Several interview questions (e.g., questions regarding how a participant came to the knowledge of their child's decision) involved participants' description of situations where identifying information or details were present. Sensitivity in the reporting of responses to this

question involved thematically reporting these dynamics without including individual or region-specific details.

With these trustworthiness, rigor, and ethical considerations in mind, the following chapter presents this study's findings. Participant demographic information as well as participants' scores on completed quantitative measures is also discussed. This is followed by an outline of themes from participants' accounts of an adult child's religious deconversion.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Participant characteristics

The current study included 10 female and 11 male participants, which included four married couples (who were interviewed individually and without their spouse being present). Participants also completed a section of the demographic form asking about their child or children that had left the family's religious tradition. In total, participants gave accounts of 23 children who had deconverted. (This number does not double-count children who were discussed by both members of a married couple who participated in the study.) Six participants gave accounts of 2 or more of their children who had left the family's religious tradition. Of the 23 children discussed, 15 are male and 8 are female; children were currently 19-51 years of age, with an average age of 32 and a median age of 33. In terms of birth order, 8 of these children are first born, 8 are youngest children in the family, and 6 are middle children. Though participants' accounts more frequently related to a male child who had left the family's religious tradition, there was a high level of variability in both the birth order and (current) ages of children that parents discussed.

Most study participants identified as theologically orthodox and institutionally-involved evangelical, Protestant Christians, based on results of completed questionnaires of religious belief and practice. In response to the open-ended question, *"How would you describe your religious affiliation/denomination?"*, most participants identified as "evangelical", "Christian", or "Christ-follower" or identified a specific evangelical, Protestant denominational affiliation such as "Baptist" or "Mennonite Brethren". Other participants noted more specific identifiers such as "evangelical Anabaptist" or "evangelical Anglican". All participants reported involvement in a church community and had considered themselves Christians for several decades. Eight participants noted that they had been involved in a church community/congregation "all [their] life".

As shown in Table 2, 19 of 21 participants reported regular religious service attendance; 18 of 21 participants reported engagement in frequent, personal religious practices. Nineteen of 21 participants reported high levels of assent to traditional Christian theological tenets on measures of doctrinal orthodoxy. On the measure of religious orientation, 17 participants scored as “intrinsic”, no participants scored as “extrinsic”, and 4 participants scored in the unclassified mid-range of the measure. On the measure of “Quest” orientation, 3 participants scored as “high”, 9 as “mid-high”, 4 scored in the middle of the scale, and 3 scored as “low”. (Two participants either did not complete the scale or did so in a way that invalidated the total score.) On the measures of theological orthodoxy, 19 participants scored as “high” while the remaining 2 participants scored in the mid-range of the scale. As no participants scored in the lower range of either of these scales, categorizing participants for comparative purposes (with qualitative data themes) could not be created.

Table 2*Demographic characteristics*

Participant	Gender	(Scoring Range)	Attendance ^a (1-6)	Practice ^a (1-6)	Intrinsic ^b (8-40)	Extrinsic ^b (6-30)	Quest ^c (12-108)	Orthodoxy ^d (-18 to 18)	Orthodoxy2 ^e (12-108)
1	M		4	1-2	35	13	83	18	99
2	M		6	6	35	14	65	18	105
3	M		1	1	26	24	89	5	60
4	M		6	5	35	20	54	18	108
5	F		6	6	38	13	65	18	108
6	F		5	6	35	17	*	17	102
7	F		4	5-6	34	10	*	18	108
8	M		4	6	31	13	46	18	108
9	F		5	6	33	11	62	18	108
10	F		5	5	36	24	66	18	108
11	M		6	6	36	11	61	18	106
12	F		5	5	34	11	38	18	108
13	M		6	4	35	16	51	18	108
14	F		6	5	35	16	50	18	108
15	M		5	5	35	13	68	18	108
16	F		5	5	38	16	36	18	108
17	M		4	5	29	12	74	4	61
18	M		4	4	32	20	43	18	108
19	M		6	5	32	15	59	18	108
20	F		6	6	36	8	62	18	108
21	F		3	2	31	18	85	18	104

* Denotes an incomplete measure

^a A range of 1-3 and 4-6 denote low and high Attendance and Practice scores, respectively.

^b Based on scale midpoints, an Intrinsic score between 24 and 40 and an Extrinsic score between 6 and 18 is categorized as Intrinsic religious orientation; an Intrinsic score between 8 and 24 and an Extrinsic score between 18 and 30 is categorized as Extrinsic religious orientation.

^c Based on scale quartiles, Quest scores between 84 and 108 (top quartile) are categorized as “high” Quest religious orientation while scores between 12 and 36 (bottom quartile) are categorized as “low” Quest religious orientation.

^d Based on scale quartiles, Christian Orthodoxy scores between -18 and -9 (bottom quartile) were categorized as “low” orthodoxy whereas scores between 9 and 18 (top quartile) were classified as “high” orthodoxy.

^e Based on scale quartiles, Doctrinal Orthodoxy scores between 12 and 36 (bottom quartile) were categorized as “low” orthodoxy while scores of 84 to 108 (top quartile) were categorized as “high” orthodoxy.

Issues of homogeneity

The quantitative measures were originally incorporated into the study design as potential ways of explaining variability in participants' accounts of a child's deconversion. The low level of variability on participants' self-reports of religious affiliation, length of institutional involvement as well as scores on religious measures (outlined in Findings chapter, Table 2) is likely attributable, in part, to the convenience and adapted snowball sampling approaches employed in this study. Though the present study focused on parents' experiences of a child's deconversion specifically within mainstream evangelical, Protestant traditions, the administered measures of belief and practice were expected to reflect greater variability of participant religiosity.

The unexpected results of the quantitative data may also suggest that subcultural-specific measures may be necessary to capture religious belief and practice variability within evangelical, Protestant traditions. All participants scored above the midpoint of the "intrinsic" orientation scale, for example, and only four participants scored above the midpoint of the "extrinsic" scale. The language utilized in several of the "extrinsic" items may be associated with negative stigma for participants identifying with evangelical, Protestant traditions. "Extrinsic" items such as, *"I go to church because it helps me to make friends"* and *"I pray mainly to get relief and protection"*, for example, contradict evangelical understandings of the believer's responsibility to discern and ensure selfless motivation in the pursuance of an authentic life of faith (Luhmann, 2012). As such, these items may not be capturing "extrinsic" dynamics and approaches of an individual's religiosity in these traditions.

Additionally, Quest items such as, *"God wasn't very important to me until I began to ask questions about the meaning of my own life"* may have been problematic for study participants. On a 9 point Likert scale ("1" being "strongly disagree" and "9" being "strongly agree"), the average participant score for this item was 3.7. One participant wrote, *"always important"* in the margin. As all participants reported several decades of church involvement

and Christian identification, responses to this particular item may have reflected participants' sense of God always having been important in their lives versus participants' understanding of the role of existential questions in matters of faith.

The consideration of variability of participants' accounts based on parents' and their child(ren)'s genders was completed through examination of several major codes generated in the process of data analysis. This exploration, however, did not demonstrate variability within themes. In the code titled "*negative or reactionary responses*", for example, excerpts from 7 male and 4 female participants (referring to 7 sons and 4 daughters) comprised the content of this code; by extension, 4 male and 6 female participants (referring to 6 sons and 4 daughters) were not determined to have explicitly discussed a negative or reactionary response to their child's deconversion. In the code titled "*processing in isolation*", excerpts from 4 male and 6 female (referring to 8 sons and 2 daughters) comprised the content of this code; by extension, 8 male and 4 female participants (referring to 7 sons and 5 daughters) were not determined to have explicitly discussed processing their child's deconversion in isolation.

Thematic overview

Throughout this and the next chapter, the words "religion" and "faith" are used interchangeably in the presentation of participant account themes. Despite terminological issues and distinctions (discussed above) in the social scientific study of religion, the synonymous use of "religion" and "faith" in reporting these findings acknowledges and reflects participants' language in their accounts. The word "religion" (or any form of this word) was infrequently utilized by participants in reference to Christian belief and practice in general or to a child's deconversion in particular. Instead, participants used words such as "faith", "spiritual", and "journey" to describe their own and/or their child's Christian belief and practice. As such, the opening interview protocol question (discussed below) of "*Tell me*

about the role of religion for you and your family” was, after the seventh interview, changed to *“Tell me about the role of faith for you and your family”*.

As shown in Figure 1, the findings are presented in five sections. The first section outlines ways that participants defined deconversion and the extent to which conversations, observations, and/or assumptions informed a parent’s definition of a child’s religious change. This section also presents general characteristics of parents’ accounts – namely, the differentiation between “religion” and “faith” as well as “sudden” versus “gradual” trajectories in discussing a child’s deconversion. Parents’ accounts of what led to or was responsible for a child’s departure from the faith is discussed in the second section. The exploration of attributional influences focuses on general cultural dynamics, child-specific considerations, and how participants described their own role – if any – in a child’s deconversion. The third section discusses participants’ initial intrapersonal reactions to and concerns about their child’s religious change. The impact of a child’s deconversion and parents’ experiences of their faith community’s response are also presented. The fourth section considers participants’ understandings of their role and responsibility for an adult child’s religious development, post-deconversion, and the extent to which parents’ perspectives have changed over time. In the fifth section, parents’ accounts of the nature and expression of authentic faith, interpretations of biblical texts and evangelical discourses related to deconversion, and negotiation of competing faith and family values is explored. Throughout this and the next chapter, verbatim words and excerpts from participant interviews will be italicized.

Figure 1

Overview of Findings chapter section

<p>I. “What happened?”: Parents’ definitions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Definitive conversations• Institutional and moral narratives• Narratives of non- or alternative praxis• Other narrative characteristics <p>II. “Who is responsible?”: Deconversion attributions</p> <p>Distal factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cultural influences• Metaphysical influences• Church and Christian hypocrisy• Peer influences <p>Proximal factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Biographical influences• A child’s disposition• Role of individuation <p>Parental factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parental inconsistencies• Parental modeling• Family/parental stressors	<p>III. “What happened next?”: Reactions to deconversion</p> <p>Intrapersonal reactions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shock, hurt, and self-blame• Impact on parents’ own faith• Empathy for child’s struggle• Fear for child’s eternal salvation• Loss of shared foundation• Concern that a child is “missing out” <p>Interpersonal responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Negative/reactionary responses• Impact on parent-child relationship• Response of the faith community <p>IV. “What now?”: Parents’ positioning of self and child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents’ change over time• Accepting a diminished role• Parents as divine representatives• Selective, prompted interactions• A child’s return at any cost <p>V. “Why that response?”: Parents’ positioning of religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tensions between religious belief and practice• Tensions between faith’s static and dynamic nature• Tensions between Christianity’s inclusive and exclusive nature• Tensions between values of family and faith
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Participant interviews formally began with the question, "Tell me about the role of religion/faith for you and your family and, as you see fit, transition into your experience of the changes in your child's religious/faith journey". Many participants first offered a chronology of their own religious upbringing, recounting details of their religious ancestry and influential events that had shaped their own understanding of faith. Several participants discussed the religious persecution faced by previous generations in European countries; some of these same participants then described their parents' and grandparents' immigration and various levels of acculturation, noting familial stances on issues of public/higher education, adoption of modern technology, and alcohol consumption, for example. A number of participants provided specific details about their own religious upbringing and/or personal conversion experience, at times referring to theologically and morally "*legalistic*", "*fundamentalist*", or even "*cultish*" characteristics that they themselves had distanced from in their own understanding of how authentic faith was expressed. A few participants noted how one or both of their parents had been "*less traditional*" in their understanding of faith and had encouraged critical thinking and involvement in, as opposed to seclusion from, the wider culture.

Conversely, some participants offered few details of their religious heritage but rather outlined how faith was an (if not the most) important family value and that they had raised their child or children in close connection with a faith community. Despite offering minimal information about their own religious heritage, most of these participants clearly stated that the role of faith had not been/was not a nominal affair in the life of their family.

"We did all the usual things: we went to church, they went to Sunday school, they went to youth group, we read Scripture in the home, we prayed."

-fourteenth participant

Similarly, participants often affirmed that their child had been provided "*the full range of whatever the church had to offer*" and that a child's religious change had not been the result of

“a lack of information”. These parents also noted that their children were aware of and had not misunderstood Christian teachings and experiences but had left the family’s religious tradition despite *“having a very firm grasp on what they were taught”*.

Following these various ways that participants situated their accounts, parents then discussed their experience of a child’s deconversion. The first section of this Findings chapter focuses on what happened and how participants defined a child’s deconversion.

“What happened?”: Parents’ definitions of a child’s deconversion

A key component of the present study involved the investigation of how participants described their experience and process of determining that their child had left the family’s religious tradition. As discussed above, the recruitment materials as well as the interview protocol utilized the phrase *“left the family’s religious tradition”*. The words *“left”* and *“religious”* were intentionally undefined as it was assumed that how parents understood these terms may be important in their accounting of this phenomenon. Specifically, for parents, was a child’s deconversion understood in moral or cognitive terms, in relation to a behavioral expression (or lack thereof), or in connection to other events or dynamics? What content or occurrences informed these definitions? Did definitional content of a child’s deconversion derive from parents’ observations of, assumptions about, and/or conversations with their child? Was a child’s deconversion understood to have occurred suddenly or gradually over time?

Most parents’ definitions of a child’s religious change stemmed from specific conversations with their child in which deconversion was discussed in cognitive and declarative terms. Definitions of deconversion in parents’ accounts were also informed by a child’s relationship (or lack thereof) with the institutional church, enactment of evangelically value-violating moral behaviour, and/or by a child’s indifferent posture toward religion. These narratives of deconversion were problematic for some participants, as such definitions precipitated questions about the necessity of evangelical praxis and behavioral expectations in the expression of genuine faith commitment. For other parents, definitions of deconversion were

offered tentatively and relied on observations that were difficult for parents to interpret. Several participants noted that though their child had departed from the family's religious tradition, they had not entirely rejected their faith – namely, core beliefs related to the existence of God or the deity and salvific work of Christ. Almost exclusively, parents described their child's departure from faith as a gradual process.

“She actually said she’s an atheist”: Definitive conversations

A child's deconversion or religious change was frequently discussed by participants in declarative, categorical, and cognitive terms, drawing from a particular interaction with or disclosure from their child. Most of these initial conversations were described as emotionally sincere and respectful on the part of their child and were not characterized as oppositional in motivation or tone.

“He sat down in the living room with us

and he told us that he no longer believed in God.”

-second participant

Parents' accounts of these conversations included a child's reinforcement that their decision would have a real and ongoing impact on their expression or cessation of religious belief and practice. One participant noted that her son had said that *“this was going to mark a major transition”*; another participant shared that her child had expressed, *“I’ve chosen my own way”*. The timing and content of these conversations were described as calculated and intentional disclosures in which a child was keenly aware of the import of their decision.

“He said, ‘I know it’s going to break your heart, but I don’t believe’.”

-thirteenth participant

Despite parents' accounts frequently recounting calm and open communication about a child's religious change, several participants did recall interactions with a more antagonistic or combative tone.

*“She would say, ‘I don’t believe in God,
I don’t believe in the Bible, I don’t like your church’.”*

-eighteenth participant

For some participants, however, defining a child’s deconversion did not involve cognitive declarations of deconversion but was informed by observations of a child’s relationship with the institutional church or departure from evangelical expectations regarding moral behaviour.

“Church is not the be-all, end-all”: Institutional and moral narratives

Though many participants’ definitions of a child’s religious change were informed by specific and definitive conversations, parents also recounted definitions involving institutionally or morally-mediated understandings of religious practice. A child’s cessation of weekly service attendance or disregard for evangelical expectations of sexual behaviour were discussed as indicators of a child’s religious change. Though most participants affirmed the importance of church attendance, parents often noted that church attendance alone did not necessarily equate with genuine Christian faith. One participant stated that *“sitting in an oven doesn’t make you a cookie”*, affirming the familiar evangelical expression which suggests that one’s external location or context isn’t necessarily indicative of one’s internal reality.

Similarly, parents discussed the difficulty in defining a child’s deconversion in terms of a lack of church attendance as the role, importance, and authority of the church had changed for their child’s generation (and, at times, for parents themselves). Participants also highlighted the importance of proper motivation for attending and the higher value of nurturing a personal relationship with God. Parents also noted that though church attendance was a spiritual *“barometer”* of sorts, declining church attendance in early adulthood could, from a developmental or life-stage perspective, be expected.

“He’s in that age group where I myself didn’t go to church on Sundays”.

-sixth participant

Participants' accounts of a child's deconversion often involved discussion of how moral behaviour was an important or even crucial part of an authentic expression of faith. Observations of a child's substance abuse, pre-marital sexual activity, or use of explicit language informed how several parents defined their child's religious change. Other parents explained how value-violating sexual behaviour was one indicator of a child's departure away from the family's faith tradition but, again, that this was only a part of their child's deconversion trajectory. For other participants, however, evangelically value-violating sexual behaviours (e.g., a son having a child out of wedlock, a daughter expressing same-sex attraction, or a child's premarital or extra-marital sexual relationship) were tied closely to how a child's religious change was defined.

*"It became known fairly early on that they
had started sleeping together and that was a big turning point."*

-ninth participant

Just as weekly church attendance was often understood as negotiable and dynamic throughout the life cycle and, thus, not exclusively indicative of authentic faith, several parents reflected on the fact that evangelical stances toward moral behaviour were also not fixed over time.

*"They live together, which is a big 'no-no' in the church,
at least the church that I grew up with.
Christianity and the church have really changed since I grew up."*

-seventh participant

In addition to how institutional or moral narratives (problematic or otherwise) defined a child's deconversion, parents' definitions of deconversion were also informed by a child's indifference toward religion or expression of non-Christian spiritual practices.

***“I don’t hear anything spiritual on his radar”*: Narratives of non- or alternative praxis**

A child’s lack of spiritual expression and/or apathy toward the church and matters of faith also informed participants’ definitions of a child’s deconversion, though a child’s lack of or alternative religious expression did not provide a conclusive definition of deconversion for many parents. These narratives of praxis (or non-praxis) included parents’ observations that a child no longer discussed spiritual matters, did not see religion as relevant, or had removed their Bible or religious literature from public view. Other parents noted a child’s expression of spirituality that was at odds with traditional evangelical values, such as pursuing eastern spiritual practices or dating a non-Christian.

“I’d love to be able to say that I have a lot of recognizable signs

like overt statements, declarations, outbursts, whatever.

There just haven’t been any. It’s just indifference.”

-seventeenth participant

These parents acknowledged that there were some assumptions implicit in defining a child’s deconversion in terms of *“indifference”*. One participant recounted that his daughter had discarded her Bible in a fairly conspicuous manner. He discussed how this observation had led him to question both what this meant for his daughter as well as why she had not disposed of it more inconspicuously.

The diverse ways that participants defined a child’s deconversion were reflected in how some definitions were based on unambiguous conversations while other definitions reflected observations of more ambiguous religious and non-religious behaviour. As such, defining a child’s religious change was often an uncertain, tentative proposition. Further, parents’ uncertain definitions of a child’s deconversion were also informed by the characterization of a child’s deconversion as a gradual process.

***“It was just a slow slide away”*: Other deconversion narrative characteristics**

In participants' accounts of a child's religious change, words such as *“faith”*, *“spirituality”*, and *“journey”* were used much more frequently than *“religion”* and *“religious”*. A few participants clarified that though their child had departed from traditional religious affiliation and practice, for example, this was a qualitatively different act than a rejection of Christian faith.

“They have left the religious tradition, certainly.

That is without a doubt, but they haven't left the faith.”

-seventh participant

Leaving the family's religious tradition meant, for these parents, that a child had distanced themselves from or rejected institutional expressions of faith (such as church attendance) but not from cognitive assent of core theological tenets (related to the existence of God and the deity and salvific work of Jesus Christ). For some participants, this distinction was again informed through conversations in which a child had stated that they continued to assent to Christian theology but had *“stepped way back”*; for other parents, concrete observations of the presence of a Bible or religious literature in a child's room, for example, was equated with a child's ongoing belief despite the cessation of church attendance or other evangelical identity markers.

Defining a child's deconversion also included parents' provision of historical context regarding their child's religious change. Almost exclusively, participants portrayed their child's deconversion as a gradual process, invoking phrases such as *“slow slide away”*, *“gradual build-up”*, *“slow fade”*, and *“he drifted slowly”*. One participant expressed that though her son's disclosure came as a shock, many years had elapsed between her son's cognitive departure from religion and his verbal declaration of deconversion.

“And it wasn't until he was in his forties that he, all of a sudden, told us:

‘I've been lying to you all these years. I don't really believe anything’. “

-twentieth participant

Participants who presented their child's trajectory of religious change as a gradual process often recounted a particularly influential or galvanizing event or experience in their child's deconversion.

"It came to a climax for him when he had the thought: 'It doesn't make sense to me that I'm right and going to heaven and all those people are wrong and going to hell. I can't wrap my brain around that' and that's where the shifting began for him."

-third participant

Though these specific events or situations were presented as precipitous or galvanizing in accounts of a child's deconversion, these experiences were discussed by parents in the context of a more gradual trajectory of their child's religious change. Parents' accounts also illuminated the extent to which a child's deconversion was a substantial change from earlier faith expression.

Summary

Many parents' definitions of a child's religious change were informed by categorical conversations with their children while other parents described observations about their child that were more difficult to interpret. Definitions informed by a child's posture toward evangelical expectations of institutional or moral behaviour were often problematic as parents observed that the church's (and, at times, their own) stance on these issues had become less rigid over time. Several participants stated that a child had departed from "religion" but not from a personal "faith". Adult children's departures from faith were, almost exclusively, described as a gradual process.

In defining a child's deconversion, participants frequently recounted their child's previously intense and committed expression of faith; other parents, however, noted that their child, often from an early age, had never exhibited an interest in matters of faith. These attributional questions of why deconversion occurs in general and why it occurred for their child

in particular were also considered in parents' experiences of an adult child's religious deconversion.

“Who is responsible?”: Attributions of deconversion

The present study explored participants' understandings of what or who had influenced and, thus, was responsible for a child's deconversion. More specifically, parents' accounts of circumstances leading up to and/or surrounding a child's deconversion were considered. Additionally, and in light of prevalent evangelical discourses of parental responsibility to ensure faith-keeping, how did parents position themselves in a child's religious change? Conversely, how did parents position their child in this phenomenon?

In this section, parents' perspectives on attributional influences in their child's deconversion are presented along a continuum ranging from distal factors (general socio-cultural dynamics) to proximal factors (closely related to a parent's child). Participants' discussions of attributional factors in a child's deconversion included several influences, often reflecting both distal and proximal points along this continuum.

On the distal end of the continuum, parents spoke about the influence of cultural secularization, the hypocrisy of the institutional church, and the spiritual battle between good and evil; on the proximal end, parents recounted the role of personality, free will, and individuation in their child's religious change trajectory. Toward the middle of the spectrum, parents reflected on their own role in their child's deconversion. Parents discussed the impact of their, at times, inconsistent modeling of Christian values as well as, for other parents, the paradoxical consequences of having consistently modelled values of tolerance and critical thinking. Participants also described child-specific factors such as the role of a child's natural disposition, unique biographical events, and rebellion or individuation.

Distal attributional dynamics

“You’re going to get swallowed up by it”: Cultural influences

On the distal end of the attributional spectrum, participants outlined external factors that were influential in a child’s deconversion. Parents discussed the role of cultural secularization, the loss of religious authority in contemporary society, cultural veneration of values of pluralism and relativism, and/or secular post-secondary education. These parents often noted the difficulty of upholding Christian values and belief in opposition to the individualistic values of the dominant culture.

*“Young people in our society, like my daughter, are nurtured into
thinking themselves as autonomous people
who are called upon to create their own meaning”.*

-second participant

In contrast to evangelical discourses related to the influence of secularization and secular institutions, one participant expressed her disagreement with these sentiments. She explained that though the timeline of her child’s religious change coincided with university enrolment, exposure to secular education was not a causal factor.

“We do not want to be the kind of people that say to other Christians:

‘Do not let your kids go to secular schools’ - I don’t buy that.

You take your faith with you – it’s portable.

If you lose it, you can lose it here or there.”

-thirteenth participant

A child’s exposure to alternate worldviews or religious traditions – whether through post-secondary education or travel experiences – was discussed by several parents as a significant factor in their child’s religious change. One participant expressed that without the technological advent of online interfaith chatrooms, his daughter would not have been exposed to ideas that he felt were pivotal in her deconversion. Though the influence of secular values was often

discussed in general terms, a number of participants explicated this conflict in terms of “good versus evil” or a cultural battle between divine and demonic forces.

“*This is spiritual warfare*”: Metaphysical influences

An additional, evangelically-distinct deconversion influence was described in terms of ongoing “*spiritual warfare*” being played out in the wider culture, the institutional church, Christian families, and, ultimately, in the spiritual life of a child. For a few parents, this dynamic went beyond non-descript forces of evil or secular values and was named “*the enemy*”, “*the devil*”, or “*Satan*”.

“You hear we have an enemy of our souls and I said to God at one point,

‘Why does it feel like the enemy is winning?’ ”

-ninth participant

Several parents provided more specific details as to the influence of evil or spiritual warfare in a child’s religious change, including pre/extramarital sexual temptation or involvement in occult-associated activities. For one participant, whose child’s religious change was precipitated by an extra-marital affair, the enemy was understood to target an individual’s weakness in an attempt to undermine Christian marriage and family.

“The enemy, the devil is going to attack our children at their weakest

points. And usually that’s in the area of sexuality, especially for men.”

-fifth participant

Another parent recounted a number of occult-related events early in his son’s life that he suspected allowed the influence of evil to draw his son away from the faith. One event involved a dubious stranger making a dark prediction about the participant’s child’s future spiritual struggles; another event involved this participant discovering that his son, as a teenager, had used a Ouija board at a friend’s house during a sleepover.

More often, however, parents’ discussions of metaphysical influences in a child’s deconversion were described in less specific terms, such as the “*temptation*” toward

evangelically value-violating sexual behaviour, substance use, or illegal activity. At times, these dynamics were understood as directly influencing a child's religious change; at other times, the influence of evil or temptation was presented as an indirect influence whereby temptation first led to value-violating behaviour which then led to a child's distancing from the family's religious tradition.

“I think he sees the falsity”: The influence of church and Christian hypocrisy

Parents' accounts of attributional factors in their child's deconversion explored the influence of secular culture and metaphysical forces yet also acknowledged dynamics within the Christian subculture itself – namely, their child's disillusionment with the church and, at times, its leaders or adherents. These criticisms often involved ways that Christianity positioned itself in relation to the wider culture as well as Christian leaders' and members' inability to live up to their espoused ideals.

Participants discussed how a child's disillusionment with certain cultural expressions of Christianity, the failings of the church, and/or the inconsistency between some Christians' belief and practice was a significant influence in their child's deconversion. Some of these parents recounted their child's difficulty with the exclusivist or intolerant posture that Christians and the church enacted toward non-Christians. For a few parents, their child's criticisms were also directed toward evangelicalism's anti-intellectual stance in matters of science, history, and social justice.

*“She said, ‘Why would I go along with a religion that promotes hatred
and intolerance and things like that?’ ”*

-first participant

Other parents explained that their child's disillusionment related to ways that the institutional church was not fulfilling its mandate of compassion and grace or was connected to suspect political agendas; additionally, children's critiques were also directed at how the church did not

reflect values of love and compassion in how it treated and spoke about its pastors, members, and non-adherents.

“He saw the incongruities between evangelicalism, on the one hand, and Jesus on the other. This only created cynicism and caused more doubt to arise in his mind. So the church has to bear part of the responsibility.”

-second participant

For many parents, their child had expressed frustration with the hypocrisy of Christians in a general sense, not explicating specific situations or issues; for a few parents, however, the hypocrisy of a pastor, parent or even grandparent was offered as a factor in a child's religious change. Some examples participants offered involved the impact of a divorce in the family, a grandparent's prejudiced language toward other people groups, or a church's unexplained dismissal of a pastor. Most parents accepted or even empathized with their child's disillusionment and did not defend the person or institutional expression that their child's criticism was directed at; one parent, however, noted that criticisms of Christian hypocrisy can be unfair or suggest more about the individual expressing the critique than about Christianity itself.

“When somebody who is a Christian gets involved sexually, it always challenges their faith. In many cases, they start blaming others for losing their faith. It's either ‘they are all hypocrites’ or ‘I don't like this or that’. Of course, they don't like rules.”

-nineteenth participant

Conversely, many participants did not offer Christian hypocrisy or their child's disillusionment as a factor in deconversion. In contrast to the quotation above, one parent specifically expressed how his daughter's deconversion trajectory did not invoke “*the old hypocrisy line*” but had been influenced more by psycho-social factors such as mental health concerns and difficulties making peer connections in the church throughout her adolescent and young adult years.

“He was in with the wrong crowd”: Peer influences

A number of participants discussed the influential role that social transition had played in a child's deconversion. A few of these parents outlined how *“getting into the wrong crowd”* at school or even in the church's youth group had led to their child adopting different values. Just as *“hypocrisy”* and *“disillusionment”* were, at times, discussed as indirect deconversion factors, some parents noted that peer influences had first led to a child's distancing from youth group or church attendance before a moral or cognitive departure from faith.

*“His friends were not friends that were in the church
and I think that really got him away completely from church.
It was a process of not having any Christian friends or influences.”*

-twentieth participant

Peer influences in a child's deconversion were also described as stemming from social disruption or transition in a child's life. Several participants discussed a family's geographical move from an established school and church youth group and the difficult time their child had adjusting to an unfamiliar environment. In these situations, a child's difficulty *“fitting in”* to a new school or church youth group had, indirectly, led to interacting with different peers which then led to a distancing from Christian faith and practice.

The influential role of a child's spouse's irreligious upbringing and/or critical posture toward faith tradition was also discussed by several participants. These parents expressed how their child's partner's religious criticisms, lack of religious knowledge, or limited Christian experience had, over the years, drawn participants' children away from the Christian faith. In addition to the discussion of these diverse, distal factors in a child's deconversion, parents' accounts also described various proximal factors in a child's religious change. These included the role of a child's unique biography, natural disposition, and need for individuation.

Child-specific influences

Just as parents discussed deconversion factors largely removed from a child's agency (e.g., metaphysical and socio-cultural influences), participants also presented religious change factors that were unique to their child. These discussions included the role of specific events in their child's life as well as a child's natural disposition toward religion.

***“When his engagement broke up, that was it”*: Biographical influences**

Specific events – both related and unrelated to religion – in a child's life were often described as having played a role in a child's deconversion. Participants discussed a child's marital infidelity, engagement break-up, social isolation, legal consequences of criminal activity, response to a loved one's death, or experience with mental illness as influential deconversion factors.

*“After his marriage broke up I think that was when he probably made
that decision that he was no longer going to embrace the faith
as we saw it.”*

-first participant

Parents also reflected on how religion was perceived by their child as inadequate to respond to, process, or resolve life transitions or stressors. Specifically, several parents provided examples of situations in which family prayers to relieve financial stressors or health conditions were not perceived by a child as efficacious.

*“My daughter thought, ‘Well, God didn’t take care of you.
You prayed for Him to take care of you and look what happened’.”*

-twelfth participant

Similarly, the influence of religion's inefficacy in a child's deconversion was understood by some participants as related to a child's own prayers not being answered, despite a child often seeking for evidence of God's existence or Christian truth.

“He said, ‘Mom, one night I got down on my knees and I prayed for hours that God would show Himself. And He didn’t.’”

-thirteenth participant

Another participant described his daughter’s resolve to engage in fervent spiritual discipline amidst making significant life changes. At the end of a prescribed period of time, she expressed that, *“My prayers don’t go past the ceiling. It just feels like I’m talking to no one”*. In addition to a child’s experience of religion’s inefficacy, several parents noted the impact of their child’s lack of religious experience(s) – whether pursued or not - in religious development and identity.

“I don’t think they’ve had any of those moments that have just anchored it for them. In my opinion, that is a requirement that will anchor faith for life, that nobody can ever take away from you.”

-eighth participant

This particular participant recalled several events in her life – namely, being spared from significant injury in an accident, witnessing the exorcism of an evil influence from a close friend, and experiencing the presence of God in both private and corporate worship – that were crucial to her solid and unwavering faith. Conversely, her children had not experienced any significant moments of their own that would *“anchor”* their faith.

For these participants, an attributional dynamic in their child’s deconversion related to experiences of religion’s irrelevance or inefficacy in the midst of relationship strain, financial stress, illness, loss, and trauma. Parents’ accounts of a child’s deconversion included not only reflection on the influence of biographical events in a child’s deconversion but also how a child’s natural disposition informed their departure from the family’s religious tradition.

“She’s always been a free spirit”: The influence of a child’s disposition

Participants described the influence of a child’s natural disposition in their deconversion trajectory, recounting how a child, often from a young age, had an inquisitive or *“contrarian”* nature, was fiercely independent, or, alternatively, was easily influenced/led astray by others.

For these parents, a child's long-standing, innate disinterest had led, over time, to a "drifting away" or departure from the family's faith tradition. Several of these parents explained the role of a child's disposition in general terms, noting that their child had simply never exhibited an interest in matters of faith.

"She left before she ever started. She never embraced the faith of our fathers, so to speak. She could never get there."

-tenth participant

Other participants discussed a child's intellectually inquisitive nature, "contrarian" attitude, or suspicious posture toward traditional systems and institutions. For most of these parents, these long-standing traits were positioned as neutral; it was the direction in which dispositional traits were focused that determined a "good" versus "bad" outcome.

"He is a very deep thinker, he's philosophical, he reads quite a lot, and he questions. So all that can be turned to the good or it can go the other way, right."

-twelfth participant

Participants frequently outlined specific ways that their child's inquisitive bent had led to exploration of secular ideas and authority, often through self-study, travel, or experiencing/observing other expressions of faith. Parents' accounts often referred to a child's issues with the authority or authorship of the biblical text or difficulty reconciling religious belief with scientific empiricism.

"He was reading books that cast doubt on Scripture, questioned the authorship of many of the books of the Bible, and raised questions about whether or not Jesus really did say all the things that he said."

-second participant

Though the role of secular institutions or post-secondary education were discussed as environments and/or influences in a child's posture of cognitive untenability toward religion, the

most common factor parents discussed was “the new atheist” literature, a recent genre of popular religious criticism most commonly associated with authors Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens (Fazzino, Borer, & Haq, 2014; LeDrew, 2013). Other cognitive untenability factors included parents’ accounts of a child’s inability to reconcile the suffering of the world with a loving God, the failed or inaccurate predictions of eschatological (apocalyptic) theology, the young earth/creationist movement, or the perceived similarity between world religions.

In contrast to how parents outlined ways in which their child’s personality had led to an active (and often cognitive) trajectory away from faith, a few parents noted how their child’s socially passive nature led to a drifting away from the family’s faith tradition. For these parents, this passivity in the face of peer pressure, for example, was understood to be a function of a child’s weak character or lack of individual resolve.

*“I think if he had really wanted to stay in the church or live a Christian life, it would have taken quite a bit of backbone from him.
And he doesn’t have backbone very much.
He just likes to go with the flow.”*

-twentieth participant

Though these participants highlighted the role of peer influences, some parents distinguished between these factors simply corresponding to their child’s natural, passive disposition versus being facilitated by a non-Christian spouse, acquaintance, or friend. Conversely, several parents explained how their child’s contrary posture toward peer pressure or authority – religious or otherwise – was a significant factor in their child’s deconversion.

“He was always a little bit rebellious”: The role of individuation

A child’s inquisitive bent or “*contrarian nature*” often manifested itself through the need to rebel, individuate from parents, or “*learn things the hard way*”. While some participants described a child’s “*contrarian*” bent as taking the form of being respectfully curious, other parents noted that

their child took a “*contrarian*” stance toward life in general and religion in particular. Participants who noted the role of rebellion in a child’s religious change often positioned this dynamic in developmental terms – namely, that departure from the family’s faith tradition was a somewhat expected consequence of their child’s stage of life.

*“We were butting heads on so many different levels
when he chose not to attend church anymore. That’s just another part of
that age of where they are exploring their own lives - a lot of rebellion.”*

-fifteenth participant

Though deconversion-as-rebellion is a familiar religious change discourse within evangelical, Protestant traditions, several parents provided specific counter-points to these narratives.

*“I think it will be interesting to see other people’s journeys as well
because the outright rebellious, ‘I hate my parents’, teenage flick of a
switch – my experience was not that.”*

-ninth participant

In several participants’ accounts, rebellion narratives involved not only a child’s refusal to attend church but also included a child’s adoption of gothic fashion, unabashed swearing in the family home, and substance abuse, for example. Parents who discussed their child’s deconversion as stemming from, in part, a “*contrarian nature*” often noted that this trajectory might also lead to a child’s eventual return to faith, as several parents did not see “*blind acceptance*” as an effective pathway toward “*making one’s faith one’s own*”. For these participants, this hope for a child’s eventual return to a more internally-motivated expression of faith informed how these parents first reacted, processed, and responded to a child’s deconversion.

In addition to the diverse distal and proximal factors participants discussed in accounts of a child’s deconversion, parents also reflected on the known or assumed ways that they saw themselves as influential or, for some, culpable in a child’s loss of faith. Parents’ accounts

explored the influence of both their inconsistency and consistency in modeling Christian values. Several parents also discussed the role that family stressors had in a child's religious change.

The influence of parents and family

"I've tried to live the Christian life": Parental inconsistencies

Participants referred to ways that their initial, and, for some, ongoing reactions to a child's deconversion included consideration of the extent to which they were to blame. Parents reflected on the faith-keeping consequences of their inability to consistently live up to "*what is being declared from the pulpit*", be the "*perfect*" parent, model a healthy Christian marriage, encourage a child's church or youth group attendance, and/or maintain in-home practices of praying before meals.

*"Whenever you get up close to a person –
and my son and I were very close – you see some of the
inconsistencies. So I think that had a factor to play in it as well."*

-second participant

A few parents described how their own expression of authentic faith and modeling of Christian values, at one time, had entered the realm of "*legalism*" or "*fundamentalism*". Though these parents expressed that they now understood their faith in less behavioural or theologically-rigid terms, they noted the impact of this on their child's departure from faith. This dynamic was not presented in terms of "inconsistency in modeling Christian values" but rather as a well-intentioned yet, in retrospect, misguided and detrimental influence in their child's own relationship to religion.

*"That kind of a legalistic approach to faith
had a radically different effect on her life, right."*

-fifteenth participant

A direct variation of the “*hypocrisy*” theme (discussed above) involved a few participants’ discussions of how their spouse’s inconsistent church attendance or less-than-laudatory posture toward religion had been an influence in their child’s deconversion.

*“The kids were like, ‘Well, if Dad is not going to church,
we’re not going to church’.”*

-eighteenth participant

For a number of these parents, ongoing guilt, regret, and feelings of failure were connected to these recounted inconsistencies; for other participants, however, inconsistencies were not portrayed as significant attributional factors in a child’s religious change. Several participants stated that a child’s deconversion likely would have occurred, despite anything that parents did or did not do. Along these lines, parents also reflected on ways that their consistent modeling of Christian values had, paradoxically, influenced their child’s departure from the family’s religious tradition.

“I want them to question. I just didn’t want them to question the faith!”: Parental modeling

Christian values that parents modeled in the family – namely, inclusivity, non-discrimination, open-mindedness, tolerance, critical thinking, unconditional love, and intellectual autonomy - paradoxically turned out, at times, to be influential in their child’s deconversion. Despite this unintended consequence, a few of these participants unapologetically stated their intentional role in modeling and teaching these values.

*“I’ve tried to teach values around inclusion and non-discrimination and
being open-minded and so those things got put in to them
and so they exercise those values.”*

-third participant

One participant reflected on the fact that though he modeled and upheld the value of critical thinking, he did not want or intend this to be directed toward foundational matters of faith such as the deity of Jesus Christ and the exclusive nature of salvation.

“My kids are all critical thinkers but they just aren’t critical thinkers in things I want them to be critically thinking about!

It goes into the ‘sacred’.”

-seventh participant

Though several participants discussed the influence of modeling values of autonomy and critical thinking, only one parent explicitly verbalized the perceived inconsistency between modeling critical thinking and then being disappointed or upset at a child’s decision not to embrace the family’s faith tradition.

“We taught her to be her own self and to be independent and then she makes these decisions. How can you then be upset at that because she’s expressing who she is.”

-first participant

This theme of a child’s deconversion as an unintended consequence of parents’ modeling of Christian values was also discussed by one participant in terms of the warmth and unconditional acceptance that were modeled in the home.

“But it’s also him feeling confident enough to make his choices, knowing he won’t be rejected in the family. Which is kind of counter-active, I guess.”

-fourteenth participant

For this participant, her decision as a parent to consistently model Christian values of unconditional love and acceptance gave her son, paradoxically, the confidence to leave the Christian faith. For another participant, his position of Christian leadership – involving both

public profile and success in “witnessing” or proselytization - was discussed as a factor in his child being specifically targeted in the larger spiritual battle between forces of good and evil.

*“I think that our children, when we’re involved in ministry,
are more prone to be attacked than other children
because they’re the children of leaders.
I mean why would Satan not want to totally discredit me?”*

-fifth participant

Once again, this dynamic is an indirect attributional factor as a parent’s effective faith was understood to have led to a child being a target of spiritual attack; forces of evil or temptation then influenced his child’s departure from the family’s religious tradition. This particular attributional process is by no means representative of a frequent theme in parents’ accounts yet it reflects the diversity of participants’ experiences – namely, that parental inconsistency and consistency were both understood as influential in a child’s religious deconversion.

“You’re exhausted, you know”: Parental/familial stressors

Family conflict, disruption, and general family stressors were also discussed by several participants as impacting a child’s deconversion. As opposed to parents’ reflections on the influence of their own (in)consistency of enacting Christian values, most familial stressors involved parents’ considerations of how their divorce, financial stressors, work-life imbalance, exhaustion, or inability to adequately attend to a child’s emotional needs influenced a child’s deconversion. For one participant, financial and health concerns inhibited her ability to adequately portray to her children the importance of religious belief and practice.

“So you’re on this track of ‘doing your best for the family’ but you’re exhausted and you can’t quite figure it out.

It started feeling shocking to me that my kids wouldn’t know how much I loved the Lord.”

-tenth participant

Other parents reflected on regrets related to how they had approached relational conflict with their child regarding matters of faith. These participants explained that it had been a mistake to relax their stance on the house rules (e.g., praying before meals or church attendance) for the sake of relational harmony as this was now understood as a factor in their child’s deconversion. One participant expressed that his regret was a function of seeing how *“It all blew up anyway!”* and so there would have been nothing to lose by risking increased parent-child conflict in his children’s adolescent years.

Summary

In exploring the dynamics and events that led to a child’s deconversion, parents discussed a diversity of attributional factors, ranging from general socio-cultural forces of secularization and the influence of spiritual warfare to specific ways that a child’s personality and biography was understood as having impacted a child’s religious change. Parents reflected on their own role in a child’s departure from the faith, often related to how and which Christian values were upheld in the home. Parents also described ways that both consistency and inconsistency of modeling Christian values had led to a child’s departure from the family’s religious tradition. Almost exclusively, parents did not cite one factor – either distal or proximal – in accounting for a child’s deconversion but rather outlined various dynamics and the influential interplay between them.

Parents’ accounts of attributional factors in a child’s deconversion often involved discussion of a child’s long-standing disconnection from or oppositional posture toward the family’s faith tradition. These observations, however, did not preclude parents from experiencing

a wide range of emotions – including shock and surprise - connected to their child’s decision. The next section presents the various ways that parents recounted their initial responses – both intrapersonally and to their child – to a child’s deconversion as well as parents’ reflections on what informed these initial reactions.

“What happened next?”: Reactions and responses to deconversion

In addition to exploring ways that participants defined a child’s deconversion and factors parents attributed to this phenomenon, the present study focused on how parents described both their internal reaction and initial interactions with their child. Participants’ accounts reflected a variety of emotions, concerns, and values connected to their experience of a child’s religious change. The impact of a child’s deconversion not only involved parent-child dynamics but, for several participants, precipitated a process of challenging their own beliefs while, at times, negotiating an often negative or unsupportive response from their faith community.

Intrapersonal reactions

While some participants did not recount specific, initial reactions, others told of highly charged emotional responses to a child’s religious change. One participant expressed her ongoing concerns with her children’s and her own salvation as *“an obsession that never leaves my mind”*. Another parent explained that the unforeseen news of his daughter’s deconversion had precipitated symptoms of depression where he had, for a period of time, difficulty *“going anywhere or seeing anybody”*. For these parents, a child’s spiritual state and eternal salvation were often stated as the ultimate concern and *“the most important thing”*.

*“I was at the point where I would even say - to my husband or to myself -
‘I would die for my son if that would mean he would come back to the
faith’. But then only later to realize that Jesus already did that, right.
So that was part of that journey.”*

-sixteenth participant

Other parents, however, did not describe their experience in negative or highly emotive terms, acknowledging evangelical faith-keeping and “parental culpability” discourses yet noting how their own religious change or questioning of these discourses had informed a different response.

*“I don’t have the same evangelical urgencies, you know,
about ‘got to raise your children to be people of faith’, etcetera.
I don’t have that same urgency that I probably did when I was younger.”*

-seventeenth participant

Despite the diversity in participants’ intensity of emotive reactions to a child’s deconversion, parents expressed feeling shocked, surprised, hurt, angry, guilty, and/or confused upon learning of their child’s decision.

“I felt really blind-sided”: The shock of a child’s deconversion

The disclosure of a child’s deconversion often contradicted parents’ assumptions that their child was, up until that point, adhering to traditional Christian belief and practice. Some parents described their child’s previous religious identity as one which included involvement in the life of the church, private pursuance of spiritual disciplines, public baptism, Bible school enrolment, formal ministry roles as pastors or youth leaders, and/or vibrant evangelistic or missionary efforts.

*“This was a shock to me. In his teenage years he made a
very intense commitment to being a Christian, to following Christ,
to be a part of the evangelical community.”*

-second participant

This experience of shock or surprise was often tied to ways that participants noted, often early in their account, that their child had been provided with a comprehensive knowledge about and connection to the faith. One participant expressed that amidst all the things he worried about as

a parent and the worst-case scenarios he imagined, the thought that his daughter would leave the faith had never crossed his mind.

*“How does a person go from having a faith to, in all senses of what you
can see, absolutely not having one? I’m just dumb-founded.”*

-ninth participant

For this participant, his dismay at his daughter’s deconversion involved not only being caught off-guard, but incredulity that an individual - with a seemingly solid faith - could categorically arrive at a place of not having faith.

“I’d sort of say I was disappointed”: Parents’ experiences of hurt

A response of hurt, disappointment, and even anger, for a number of parents, stemmed from the fact that modeling a healthy marriage, consistently enacting/teaching Christian values, ensuring a secure, stable and loving home, and/or nurturing a healthy parent-child relationship had not been enough to ensure successful faith transmission.

“I felt like saying, ‘You think what we believe in is a fairy tale?

All the work we did loving you?

You’re kind enough to tell people you have this wonderful family

but where do you think that came from?!’ ”

-thirteenth participant

Similarly, a child’s deconversion was often perceived as disregard for the Christian foundation and motivation which had sustained the stable and nurturing family that a parent had provided and that a child had benefitted from. Parents discussed the difficulty in now having to consider that something so essential – to both a parent’s and their family’s identity – was being rejected. In this sense, a child’s deconversion was, initially, taken very personally by a number of participants.

*"It's hard for me to feel that something that's been that important
to me for all my life is of no consequence.
It has to be of some consequence."*

-seventeenth participant

This sense of hurt and disappointment at a child's rejection of the family's religious identity was expressed, by one participant, as a disrespectful and inconsiderate act that necessitated forgiveness.

*"When you go through a traumatic experience like this,
there is a lot of hurt on the parents' side
and we had to forgive her for what she did to us as parents.
We felt mistreated in a sense."*

-nineteenth participant

In contrast to how these parents experienced surprise, hurt, disappointment, and even offense at their child's deconversion, other participants described a different reaction. One participant acknowledged that though he wasn't sure what other parents' experiences were, he was "*not coming with a sob story*" about his disappointment with his child. He acknowledged and then countered evangelical discourses which he felt relied on an expectation of dismay and opposition.

*"It's like, 'oh yah, it's all us parents whose kids have walked away from
the faith and we're so disappointed in that' and then I go 'I'm not'
and I don't know how to react to my own non-disappointment!
Then I question, 'Am I wrong feeling the way I do?'"*

-first participant

As much as this participant was aware of evangelically-expected responses to deconversion as well as his own experience which departed from this expectation, his reaction to his daughter's deconversion was characterized by internal conflict and questioning of the correctness of his

experience.

“Did I do something wrong?”: Self-examination, blame, and regret

Participants described initial responses to a child’s religious change as involving regrets, self-blame, feelings of failure, and examination of what they could have done differently. These experiences often involved identifying indicators or key junctures in a child’s faith journey where a parent, in retrospect, could have intervened. For some parents, these reflections were expressed as general regrets; for others, accounts included questions about adequate time spent with their children, how attentive they were as parents, if they had prayed enough, or how intentional they had been in the initiation of spiritual conversations.

“You feel you failed: ‘Have I spent enough time with him?

Have I been observant enough?

Was there anything I could have done to prevent this?’ ”

-nineteenth participant

Even participants who questioned aspects of evangelical “parental culpability” discourses often recounted an initial process of questioning past parenting decisions and approaches. Parents expressed that this was a short-lived chapter in their story as they soon determined that retrospective analysis was not a productive exercise; a few parents, however, reflected on the continued guilt they lived with for failing to ensure a child’s faith-keeping. This sense of failure also led several participants to question components of their own understanding of faith.

“My kids are rocking my world”: Impact on parents’ own faith

A child’s deconversion precipitated difficult questions about the value and effectiveness of faith for a number of participants, several of whom described this part of their experience as a “test of faith” or “spiritual crisis”.

*“We went into a bit of a spiritual crisis ourselves – like ‘one of our kids
has given up his faith’. And we are still broken-hearted about it.”*

-thirteenth participant

For these parents, a child's departure from the family's faith tradition led not only to feelings of rejection or offense but also precipitated difficult questions about parents' own faith – namely, if the Christian faith was not compelling or efficacious enough to be accepted by one's own child, what then was its value?

“At the beginning of this journey, I told God I didn’t know if my faith was worth continuing if my daughter’s just going to walk away from it.”

-ninth participant

More specifically, a child's religious change was described by a number of participants as precipitating reflection about key aspects of faith such as biblical literalism and requirements for salvation. This questioning of foundational components of evangelical theology was not discussed in “*spiritual crisis*” terms but was expressed in terms of the growth and refinement that was necessary to experience authentic faith.

“He’s challenged me not to take everything so literally, maybe, in the Bible. I think that’s stretched my faith into different places too, which scared me a little at first.”

-twenty-first participant

Similarly, a number of participants described how a child's religious change had compelled parents to differentiate between non-negotiable and secondary (or culturally-conditioned) components of authentic faith. For some, this “*test of faith*” included questions and doubts about their own religious belief and practice and informed a sense of empathy for their child's faith journey.

“He thought long and hard about how to best tell us”: Empathy for child’s struggle

Initial reactions to a child's deconversion included parents' acknowledgement of how difficult the religious change process had been for their child. One participant expressed that preceding any other emotion or reaction to her son's disclosure was a sense of sadness that her

son had been, for many years, silently determining how to tell his family about no longer assenting to the Christian faith.

*“I was sad for him and couldn’t believe that he had lived for so long
unable to talk to us and he’d been like this since he was in high school.”*

-twentieth participant

Parents’ empathy for their child was also connected to specific conversations with their child about religious change. A child’s experience of “*anguish*”, “*wrestling*”, and “*heartbreak*” in deciding to discuss their deconversion with their parent was acknowledged by several participants. A few participants also disclosed that empathy with their child’s journey was informed by parents’ own frustrations with or departure from aspects of institutional and individual expressions of Christianity.

*“She said, ‘Well, I don’t believe in heaven and hell’ and I caught myself
thinking, ‘I know how you feel’ because I’ve questioned that myself -
I’m actually grappling with some of those same questions.”*

-first participant

*“There’s a lot of things I agree with him on in terms of some of the
inauthentic values or statements of people who identify as Christian.”*

-twenty-first participant

Participants’ empathy regarding their child’s religious change process did not necessarily equate with a lack of parental concern about their child’s decision. Almost without exception, participants outlined specific issues they had with their child’s deconversion, including concerns for a child’s eternal salvation, that their child was “missing out” on resources for meaning and wellbeing, and/or regarding the loss of a common faith identity.

***“I don’t know what’s going to happen to his eternal life”*: Fear for a child’s eternal security**

Parents’ initial reactions to a child’s religious change were informed by specific concerns relating to the consequences of deconversion. As deconversion had potentially compromised a child’s eternal salvation, many participants discussed considerations related to salvation and the afterlife. A number of parents described the issue of a child’s eternal security as the most significant and difficult component of their experience.

*“Initially I had this fear about ‘oh my goodness,
if he died tomorrow, he’s not going to go to heaven’.*

You know, because you have to believe in God to go to heaven.”

-sixth participant

Some participants understood their child’s deconversion as having enacted a categorical exclusion from salvation. One participant, referring to a particular biblical passage, cited that *“it is given unto man once to die and after that, the judgement”*. Another parent expressed that her daughter was *“going toward her own death one day. And she has no salvation because she’s thrown it away”*. Other parents, however, were less certain about the extent to which their child’s deconversion negated a previous conversion.

*“I think my biggest thing is sadness because I don’t know
what’s going to happen to his eternal life.”*

-twentieth participant

Though deconversion was, at times, understood to enact (or potentially enact) a state of divine judgement and exclusion from God’s presence, parents’ concerns about their child’s eternal destiny were discussed in terms of isolation from family versus the traditional or orthodox evangelical definition of hell as divine punishment or separation.

*“As a parent, I don’t think there is anything more wrenching or
heartbreaking than the possibility of
‘what if we aren’t together for eternity?’ ”*

-eighteenth participant

*“At the end of the day, after this life, you want our family to be in the
same ‘place’. And so, the concern is always, ‘What if he’s not there?’ ”*

-twenty-first participant

The issue of a child’s salvation – initially and, for some parents, over time - was also informed by the interpretation of specific biblical texts related to eternal security. One parent expressed that the theology of eternal security was not something she focussed on as some biblical texts affirmed that one is “*sealed by the Holy Spirit*” upon salvation while other texts “*seem to imply that you can lose your salvation*”. Other parents, however, affirmed salvation as a one-time, irreversible act that ensured an individual’s eternal security, though this was usually stated with a measure of hesitancy or uncertainty.

*“Our kids have made commitments and their names are written
in the Lamb’s Book of Life and we cling to that and just trust that one day
there will be an awakening. They did make that commitment
when they were young but there is that little bit of – ‘I sure hope so’.”*

-eighteenth participant

This diversity in the interpretation of “eternal security” texts was also reflected in the feedback that some participants received from Christian peers. One participant recounted, in the context of a small group meeting, other Christians’ perspectives that his daughter’s salvation was secure, based on the doctrine of eternal security. This study participant could not fully accept this assurance in light of his concerns about his daughter’s current lifestyle and the question of whether or not she had ever made an authentic, Christian commitment.

“They say, ‘Well, you’re saved once, saved forever’. And I said, ‘Yah, I don’t know if I can be comfortable with that’, you know. ‘Was she saved?’ I don’t know about the theology of that. I just know she’s not in harmony with the Lord right now.”

-thirteenth participant

A small number of participants expressed that issues of a child’s eternal security were neither parental nor hermeneutical concerns as they had questioned, long before a child’s deconversion, the existence of an afterlife or concluded that heaven and hell were not literal places or destinations of eternal punishment or reward.

“I really don’t think about heaven and hell. I honestly am not sure what they mean anyway. If there is a heaven, it’s on earth, in my mind.”

-seventeenth participant

For the few participants who questioned or contested mainstream evangelical doctrines of salvation, this was rarely portrayed as a clear rejection of a theological tenet but as a conclusion informed by the study of Christian history, hermeneutics, and other Christian denominational understandings of salvation. Just as many participants described their concern for their child’s salvation and the potential eternal separation from family, several parents expressed feelings of loss related to how a child’s deconversion disrupted intergenerational faith continuity and commonality.

“There isn’t that common belief together”: Loss of shared foundation

Participants often discussed how a child’s deconversion created a “*separation*” or relational divide between a parent and child. These parents explained how the loss of common and accepted beliefs meant that there were now certain parts of their life and faith journey that they could no longer share with their child. For several participants whose child’s deconversion was more recent, questions and confusion about how to find common ground with their child were often acknowledged. In addition to participants’ loss of the family’s shared faith,

experiences of loss also involved ways that a child's deconversion disrupted the family's intergenerational religious continuity.

"One of the things that is very painful to deal with is when a son walks away from the church, he takes his wife and children with him."

-second participant

For one participant, this issue was informed by specific evangelical discourses and biblical texts which position a husband as "head of the home" and the one responsible to initiate the immediate family's faith practices, within and outside the home.

"He's not just the spiritual leader but he is the head of the house.

So when he walked away, they followed, right."

-twelfth participant

A child's deconversion, in this sense, was not only experienced as the end of a shared religious commonality but as a disruption of a parent's relationship with a child's spouse and children. The loss of intergenerational faith continuity and, possibly, family members' eternal salvation was often connected to a concern that children and grandchildren were now unable to connect to sources of divine meaning, wholeness, and psychological wellbeing.

"I don't know how people can live without God": Concern that a child is "missing out"

Connected to parents' loss of faith commonality with their child, many participants discussed their concerns that a child's rejection of faith had now separated them from access to exclusive truth and resources that the Christian faith enabled. Parents expressed concerns related to their child's ability to live a meaningful life and adequately cope with life's difficulties, now that they had rejected the Christian faith. In describing this concern, parents frequently stated that their child was "*missing out*".

“As parents, the biggest thing of all is that he's going to miss out on the real values of life. And that's very hard.”

-sixteenth participant

This theme was often tied to a parent's sense that the ability of their child to fully connect to or enact values of love, compassion, or forgiveness was also inhibited. For these participants, a child's deconversion was understood as foregoing the “*special*” or “*extra*” connection to divine access, perspectives, and resources that enable true and authentic meaning, purpose and participation in life.

“And to think that one of your children is going to be living a lifestyle that doesn't really have any overall purpose to it....

As Christians we have an extra perspective -

Christians can be full participators in life because

we see that everything has a purpose.”

-nineteenth participant

Concerns about a child's “*incompleteness*” or “*missing out*” were also explained through more specific, pragmatic examples. While expressing her pride for her son's caring approach for the people around him and commending how he approached his role and responsibility as a father and husband, one participant stated that, without Christian faith, her son's ability to realize the fullness of these relationships was inhibited and incomplete.

“I believe he would be a happier, better person, were faith active in his life – I think he'd be a better husband, he'd be a better father.”

-thirteenth participant

Additionally, several parents expressed the fear that their child would now not be able to adequately cope with life's relational stressors or traumatic events. For some of these parents, this was discussed through the lens of concern for a child's general wellbeing; for others, however, their concern was informed by their difficulty conceptualizing how unbelievers –

disconnected from divine meaning and resources - cope with life's travails and tragedies.

"I don't understand how people who have no belief, how they get through life when the turmoil and the tragedies do start happening."

-sixth participant

Similarly, a number of parents expressed concern that their child's marriage relationship might be more susceptible to conflict or even divorce without access to divine resources to provide meaning and tools for communication and conflict resolution. In contrast to these concerns in many participants' accounts, other parents questioned if their child's religious change did, in fact, preclude them from experiencing a purposeful, complete, and happy life.

"There's nothing I can criticize about her life - the way she's living and responding to people around her. She's a wonderful person and she makes life better for herself and others and that's what Christ called us to do. So why do we criticize somebody like her so much?"

-first participant

Parents described diverse initial reactions to a child's deconversion, including shock, hurt, self-blame, and empathy. Concerns about how to now connect with their child and whether or not intergenerational faith transmission would continue were also discussed. Concern and, for some parents, questions about a child's eternal security or ability to live a meaningful life apart from faith also characterized participants' accounts. In addition to how internal reactions were described, parents' accounts also included a wide range of initial interactions with their child.

Interpersonal responses

Parents outlined negative, reactionary, argumentative, and persuasive initial interactions with their child as well as, for some parents, open and accepting initial responses. Regardless of how participants characterized these initial responses, parents affirmed ways that a healthy parent-child relationship was being maintained amidst religious differences.

“I said, ‘Well you got to be kidding me!’ “: Negative/reactionary responses

Often stemming from parents’ experience of shock or surprise at a child’s disclosure of their religious change, several participants recounted negative or reactionary responses to their child. These parents explained that part of the difficulty of these initial exchanges was attributable to their child having determined the timing of the conversation; parents, on the other hand, were not given time to process this news and felt unprepared to respond to their child in a balanced or appropriate fashion.

“When she talked to me, I would actually respond in anger.

My reaction would be harsh and I knew it was not the right reaction.”

-seventh participant

Parents often characterized their initial responses as leading to argumentative and emotionally-charged interactions. These exchanges took the form of providing theological proofs for the Christian faith or arguments against agnosticism, intended to persuade a child to reconsider their decision. One participant appealed to both her trustworthiness as a parent as well as the authenticity of her own Christian experience in an attempt to persuade her daughter to return to the faith.

“And I said, ‘Listen, I’m your mother. You can believe me that these

things are true: God exists. Jesus exists. He is God incarnate.

You can believe me’.”

-sixth participant

Despite the number of participants who recounted initial negative and/or argumentative responses to their child’s deconversion, most of these parents discussed how interactions intended to persuade were short lived and quickly determined to be ineffective. Participants affirmed that, amidst difficult interactions about parent-child religious differences, the parent-child relationship had been maintained.

***“It’s just about listening to each other”*: Impact on parent-child relationship**

Participants – often early in the interview process – stated that their child’s deconversion had not led to a deterioration of parent-child communication or an estranged relationship even in light of several parents’ accounts of initially negative or argumentative interactions. For these parents, difficult conversations and an honest expression of categorically different perspectives on faith were understood as indicative of a healthy parent-child relationship.

“Her decision to live the way she does has never been an issue with our immediate family and it has never caused any division.”

-first participant

Statements of undisrupted parent-child relationships were often followed by the acknowledgement of evangelical discourses reinforcing expectations that a devout Christian parent would distance themselves from their child, interact with them conditionally, or minimize communication in order not to be seen as condoning a sinful lifestyle.

“I know older parents who have completely cut their kids off because they’ve made choices outside of their faith. And it’s absolutely knowing from the very beginning of this journey that I did not want that.”

-ninth participant

Another participant discussed how these “*shunning*” discourses were derived from misinterpreted biblical passages which failed to consider biblical values such as being a witness in the world and the importance of relationship in modeling truth to unbelievers.

“The idea that ‘if somebody is of the world, you are not to be connected to them’ comes from the Bible, but is misunderstood.

It says over and over again that, ‘you are not to be of the world but you are to be in the world’. How else can you have an influence or a relationship with somebody? Just because they don’t believe the way you do, it’s wrong to cut them off because Christ wants us to be a witness in their life.”

-sixteenth participant

Other parents discussed how these “*shunning*” discourses were disproportionately derived from biblical texts outlining a church’s disciplinary response to a believer’s immorality. For these parents, an appropriate response to a child’s deconversion had to resemble Christ’s teachings in the parable of “*the prodigal son*” or interactions with “*the woman caught in adultery*”, for example. As such, a child was now positioned as an unbeliever or “*stranger*”, thus requiring a posture of forgiveness and unconditional love.

“And I said to our son, ‘We will not treat you differently than we would treat strangers because I think that would be very dishonouring and disrespectful to God’. We will live out the values that God has given us. Even with our own children. Especially with our own children.”

-fifth participant

Though participants affirmed that a child’s deconversion had not led to relational divisiveness, a number of parents did express that parent-child communication had become strained or that the topic of religious differences was a difficult one to initiate with their child.

“I feel that he is so antagonistic. And if you mention anything about Christianity, it almost seems like he’s angry about it.”

-twentieth participant

A few parents expressed that this tension had reached a point where they had decided to no longer bring up conversations involving religion or a child's religious state, to avoid the risk of "*straining relationships*". Despite communication being compromised by a parent's choice to no longer discuss religion, these participants outlined ways that relationship was maintained.

*"But we have to let him know that he's welcome to come to anything
our family is involved in and that we'll just love him the same."*

-twentieth participant

Amidst parent-child religious differences and some participants' conflicted decision to no longer bring up conversations about religion, many parents expressed that there had not been a significant change in the way that they related to their son or daughter. These parents explained how a healthy parent-child relationship and open communication were reinforced through ways that their child continued to exhibit respect for their parents' faith expression, for example. Even children who were unwilling to discuss their own faith journey or religion in general continued, in some cases, to ask their parents about their church involvement or attend services with their parents when visiting the family home.

*"She's very supportive of what I do. This is the path of spirituality
she's chosen and she still respects ours totally."*

-first participant

The upholding of the parent-child relationship amidst religious differences involved parents' decisions about how and when to initiate conversations about matters of faith. Parents' relationally-accepting interactions with their children often involved interpretive negotiation of biblical texts related to church discipline, Christ's parables, and the believer's posture toward the unbeliever, sinner, or "stranger". Parents' decisions to respond to a child's religious change in relationally-affirming ways did not always align with the expectations of participants' peers, leaders, and/or church community.

***“I don’t want to broadcast this”*: Response of parents’ faith communities**

Participants not only discussed how a child’s religious change affected the parent-child relationship, but also how the church community’s response impacted parents’ experiences. Just as many participants’ initial internal reactions involved a sense of self-blame for a child’s deconversion, parents often expected that parental culpability discourses would be applied to them for not having ensured a child’s faith-keeping.

*“There’s that thought of, ‘I’m a bad parent,
because our kids aren’t going to church’.”*

-seventh participant

Though parents explained that issues of deconversion were not often addressed by religious leaders or in larger congregational settings, one participant described a specific interaction with a church member that reinforced such parental culpability discourses.

*“He said that children like going to church
until their parents or someone else teaches them otherwise.”*

-sixth participant

At times, participants’ faith communities reinforced expectations that parents should relationally distance themselves from their child, so as not to suggest acceptance or tolerance of a child’s moral or theological departure from the faith. This was problematic for participants as these evangelical discourses pitted parents against children or certain biblical texts over others.

*“I know we will be misunderstood and I know there are people out there
thinking we’re being soft on sin. But we’re not –
we’re seeking to live out the gospel.”*

-fourth participant

Participants noted that these evangelical discourses related to issues of faith and family were more likely to be addressed in a “home” or “care” group of Christian peers versus that of a larger, congregational gathering. In these smaller contexts, however, the diversity of peers’

opinions and biblical interpretations regarding deconversion rarely brought clarity or emotional support for participants regarding their experience and process.

*“There’s even theological differences within the group
and when I talk to other people about it, I was not happy with the
reactions. I mean some were like,
‘Aw, it’s terrible - he’s going to go to hell’.”*

-thirteenth participant

Parents provided many examples of the diverse range of perspectives in small-group settings. One member of a small group would appear to be unconcerned with a child’s deconversion, stating that a child will make their own decisions regardless of a parent’s input; another member would espouse “*tough love*”, described as enacting a relationally-punitive or conditional posture toward a child until they began exhibiting more acceptable behaviour; other Christian peers would invoke the doctrine of “*eternal security*” to support their opinion that their child had previously made an irreversible faith commitment and, thus, their eternal salvation remained intact. Amidst this diversity of perspectives, parents who discussed the response of their faith community often expressed the lack of acknowledgement, information, and support given or of the judgement they felt in not having ensured a child’s faith-keeping.

As a counter-point to these experiences of isolation and judgement, a few parents explicitly noted that they had received very supportive responses from their faith community upon parents’ disclosure of their child’s deconversion.

*“I would say that the people I have opened myself up to –
there’s some people that you just wouldn’t – they understand the hurt
and I’ve never felt like my parenting was called to question.”*

-eighteenth participant

Similarly, one participant noted the support he had received from a Christian counsellor in processing his experience; another participant’s reading of Christian literature related to

“prodigal” children was described as helpful in determining her own response to her child. Though congregational and small group settings were not generally described as safe or supportive environments to disclose and process a child’s deconversion, several participants spoke about a supportive person or mentor with whom they felt comfortable discussing their experience. Parents often described these peers as individuals who could relate to this experience and/or had questioned, at some juncture, evangelical faith keeping and parental culpability discourses.

Despite ways that parents described supportive responses from other Christians, many participants expressed that their experience, expectation, or perception of judgement from their faith community had led to feelings of isolation. Parents explained how they would “*test the waters*”, for example, with other Christian peers and parents to determine the level of theological openness and shared experience. These participants disclosed how they very rarely discussed a child’s religious change and that the research interview was one of very few environments in which they had shared their experience.

“It’s not something that I’ll share openly with anybody because I’ll test the waters a bit because I’m not eager to go jump into judgement.”

-third participant

For other parents, the selective disclosure of a child’s deconversion was a function of not knowing if their experience was normal or an “*anomaly*”, especially if their response to their child’s deconversion did not include relational distancing from their child.

In addition to evangelical faith-keeping and parental culpability discourses, a number of participants discussed the impact of “child deficit” discourses that were also, though less frequently, invoked and reinforced by religious peers and leaders. Just as parental culpability discourses attribute a child’s deconversion to a parent’s failure, child deficit discourses position deconversion as largely a function of an individual being undisciplined, hedonistic, or weak-willed in the face of temptation. Though a few participants attributed their child’s deconversion,

in part, to such factors, most parents did not. Several parents described interactions with their religious peers or community in which they felt compelled to defend or buffer their child from these assumptions and discourses.

“I don’t know if the hesitancy would have been fear of being labelled as bad parents – it would have been more to protect our son from gossip.”

-nineteenth participant

The impact of a child’s deconversion often involved issues with participants’ adherence to their faith community’s expectations related to faith-keeping responsibilities and, when unsuccessful, imposing conditions on the parent-child relationship. Parents’ difficulty maneuvering these dynamics often led to a decision to either process a child’s deconversion in isolation or to “*test the waters*” before disclosing a child’s deconversion to religious peers and church leaders.

Summary

Parents’ accounts of a child’s religious change involved a range of initial reactions including shock, surprise, hurt, disappointment, and self-blame as well as less emotionally-intense internal responses to deconversion. Parents often expressed concerns that a child was foregoing exclusive access to resources for purpose, coping, and, ultimately, eternal security. Participants’ accounts also reflected how a child’s deconversion was experienced as a loss of the family’s shared religious identity and parent-child relational commonality.

The impact of deconversion was also discussed as precipitating a parent’s “*spiritual crisis*” or period of questioning a faith that had not been compelling enough to be accepted by their child. Initial interactions with a child were described as negative and argumentative by some participants and, by others, as calm and communicative exchanges that had not led to relational divisiveness. Almost exclusively, parents affirmed that despite their initial reactions and concerns, maintaining an honest and caring relationship with their child, even in the face of the faith community’s expectations to the contrary, was of utmost importance.

Participants also reflected on the extent to which their response to a child's deconversion had changed over time. For these parents, these shifts often involved redefining their role in light of a child's free will and personal responsibility.

“What now?”: Parents' positioning of self and child

In addition to the exploration of participants' initial reactions to deconversion, concerns about their child's decision, and the impact of the faith community's response, analysis focused on how parents' negotiations may have changed over time. Specifically, what dynamics informed parents' understandings and conclusions related to their ongoing parental role, faith-keeping responsibilities, and understanding of their child's adult status and agency?

These considerations often informed parents' decisions to accept a diminished or indirect role in a child's faith development and expression. While upholding a child's adult status and agency, participants described their current role as one of modeling Christian values and engaging their child about matters of faith only when divinely prompted. For several parents, enacting a diminished role in effecting a child's return to the faith involved deferral to God's will and purposes in bringing about a child's return, even at potentially great cost.

***“Over time, I got over it, as much as a person can”*: Parents' change over time**

Though not all participants provided specific ways that their perspective had changed over time, several parents described a significant shift in their thinking and response to their child's deconversion. Some participants discussed changes in their own understanding of faith while other parents spoke more generally about how a less reactive or strict approach to both faith and parenting had been enacted. These dynamics were explained to be a result of personal growth over time, a function of observing what was or was not effective in maintaining a healthy parent-child relationship, and/or motivated by the desire to influence a child's return to the faith. Though parents expressed their hope for a child's return, participants did not discuss their child's deconversion as a reversible “stage” or an impulsive action, but often as a well-researched and emotionally anguished decision. As the import and finality of a child's decision

were not minimized by participants and the consequences were of ultimate and eternal significance, parents' accounts reflected their intentional process in determining a long-term approach.

“Over the years I’ve mellowed a lot in terms of being black or white and a hard-liner. I don’t really see that as the way that Jesus would’ve handled things. It’s really comfortable to be in control, but does it actually work as a parent?”

-eleventh participant

Similarly, the change in participants' responses over time was also a function of having to consider that a child may not return to the faith and even if a return occurred, it may be a decades-long process. Participants discussed biblical passages related to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in drawing all people to (or back to) God as well as the possibility that parents themselves may never see this desired outcome.

“I always have a belief that maybe he will come back and maybe it won't be until after my death. But I think I need to cling on to that belief that it's never too late, never, until he dies, then it's too late.”

-twentieth participant

In light of these chronological unknowns, participants described a reflective and intentional process of determining their role and responsibility in influencing a child's return to the faith. For these parents, the uncertainty of not knowing if a child's change would occur “*tomorrow or in thirty years*” or before a parent's own death heightened the importance of establishing a sustainable relational approach that would not further distance a child from the family's religious tradition.

“I see them as adults, not children”: Accepting a different or diminished role

Participants' negotiation of a child's deconversion over time involved determining the extent to which parents were still responsible for ensuring an adult child's religious belief and

practice. Though several participants acknowledged that they continued to live with regrets and guilt for the ways in which they saw themselves as culpable in a child's deconversion, these parents noted that their role had now changed in light of their child's adult status and agency.

"I don't want to push my ideas on him - he's an adult now, right.

So it's not my place to do that with him anymore."

-fifteenth participant

While affirming her son's adult status and ability to make his own decisions in matters of faith, one participant's process entailed a clear departure from the parental culpability discourses upheld by her community's religious leaders. For this parent, negotiating deconversion involved respecting her son's autonomy and making a clear distinction between her responsibility and her son's choices.

"I told myself, 'It really has nothing to do with you, he's an adult. So, move on'. If a person is going to die and they've made peace, or they haven't, that's between them and God.

So, you know, I stopped worrying about it."

-sixth participant

Parents' determination of a diminished role in a child's faith development often involved reaffirming that the family's faith identity and expression had never been nominal or passive. The acceptance of a child's choice related closely to the fact that their child had not made this decision because of a "lack of information" or confusion about religious expectations.

"I can't do much more than we're doing. We live our faith, we pray, we talk about things we've heard in church, things we read in Scripture.

That's about all we can do. The rest is up to God."

-fourteenth participant

In addition to participants' acceptance of a child's adult status and autonomy, parents' consideration of a different or diminished role was frequently informed by interpretations of

biblical texts related to parental culpability. Participants' accounts often included discussion and diverse interpretations of a well-known Old Testament passage which states, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6, KJV).

"Most people take that passage as a promise, so when it doesn't work they feel all this guilt. In terms of Scripture, that's not a promise – they're generic truths that generally hold true. There are promises in Scripture, but that's not one of them. That was very freeing for me to understand that."

-eleventh participant

"There's a promise that says, 'Bring up your child in the way they should go and when they are old they won't depart from it'. It doesn't say 'and they won't depart from it'. It says 'when they are old' and 'old' sucks because there's a lot of waiting between now and 'old'."

-eighteenth participant

Some parents understood this passage as a causal promise while others made distinctions between unequivocal "*promises*" and "*proverbs*" of conventional wisdom. One participant explained that the intended meaning of "in the way he should go" is more accurately interpreted as "*aligned with their natural disposition*", based on the original language of the text. Some participants recited the passage using the words "*will not*" while others used the word "*may*".

For these participants, accepting a new and diminished role in a child's faith development entailed reaffirming the adequate spiritual foundation that had been provided and accurately interpreting biblical texts related to faith-keeping and parental culpability. Parents' processes of determining their responsibility also involved defining their role in relation to God's role in effecting a child's return to the faith.

“It’s not our job to police for God”: Parents as divine representatives

Parents’ acceptance of a different or diminished role in their adult child’s faith development was rarely understood as a cessation of parental involvement. Participants often described a change, over time, from initial argumentative or persuasive attempts at influencing a child’s return to a more selective approach. This shift was informed by parents’ perspectives that arguing led to a child’s relational withdrawal, *“no one becomes a Christian because he or she loses an argument”*, or *“God gives people space”*.

*“I wanted to take him by the shoulder and shake him hard
and say just the right words to magically make him choose differently.*

So it was the wisdom to stop myself.”

-ninth participant

Over time, this intentional yet selective discernment of when and how to interact with a child about matters of faith was predicated, for these participants, by a shift away from parents’ responsibility for an adult child’s faith development and toward a consideration of God’s role and ability to influence a return.

*“I can’t fix this. I am powerless to do anything about it
and it is God’s problem.”*

-eighteenth participant

Most parents did not categorically abdicate all responsibility to God, but described their role in general terms - namely, being a *“light”* or an example of God’s love and grace and discerning *“when to speak and when not to speak”*; other parents offered specific examples of how this role had been enacted through their continued church involvement or prayer and Bible reading at family meals.

*“In front of my child – no matter what age –
I want to represent who God is.”*

-fifth participant

Participants' consideration of themselves as a model or representative of God's character was also informed by biblical passages which position children as divine "gifts" and parents as temporary or adoptive caretakers. These parents explained that they did not, ultimately, own or "possess" their child, that children are "lent" to them by God, and that "God loves [their child] *more than [they] ever could*". This perspective was often tied to the conclusion that God desired a child's return to the faith even more than parents did; as such, it was God's job – in his timing and in his way - to enact a child's return.

"I need to have faith in Jesus that He loves them more than I love them, and He will care for them and draw them in His way, which is maybe not the way I would see it needs to be done. So, maybe it's a letting go."

-seventh participant

Parents' processes of defining their role and "letting go" were also connected to interpretation of biblical passages related to proselytization and conversion more generally which uphold God's will over the believer's role in drawing someone to the faith. One participant expressed, "You cannot convert anybody unless God's Spirit has prepared them" while another noted that, "It's not my job to convert anybody".

"I said to her, 'I need to model Christ for you, but ultimately, this is your choice and it's not up to me to make sure that you're a Christian'."

-eleventh participant

Participants' understanding of their role as a divine representative or caretaker informed the selective ways that parents interacted with their children. For many parents, ensuring their ongoing influence was tied to the hope of a child's return; for other parents, however, the selective discernment of how and when to interact with their child about matters of faith was motivated by the hope for a continued parent-child relationship.

"We tried the apologetics piece": Selective and divinely-prompted interactions

In light of participants' understanding of their continued responsibility to model Christian values

to their child, parents described the importance of not missing opportunities to discuss matters of faith with their child. As opposed to initial reactionary responses, parents outlined their decision to wait until prompted or until a conversational opportunity “*that could be taken one step further*” presented itself before “*injecting [their] own ideas*” about matters of faith.

“In the beginning I just wanted to put in, I’ll call them, ‘digs’:

‘Well, you should pray about that. You know you can pray about that’ or

‘I’m praying for you’. And I still will say things like that.”

-ninth participant

In addition to conversational opportunities, a number of participants recounted situational events in which they were able to enact religious influence. One participant described how her children were able to request her assistance with day-to-day issues such as vehicle maintenance or scheduling conflicts; another participant discussed how even though his daughter had left the faith, he had been able to answer her children’s (his grandchildren’s) questions about how to become a Christian and lead them through this process.

Parents also described domain-specific considerations in deciding when to bring up issues related to religion. The “*sleepover question*”, as one participant termed it, referred to a parents’ decision to prohibit or allow a child to share a room with a romantic or common-law partner while staying in the parents’ home. These parents concluded that they would not dictate or comment on a child’s moral or sexual behaviour outside the parents’ home but within the parents’ home, children could not share a bedroom with their significant other unless legally married. These expectations of a child’s continued adherence to Christian moral behaviour were tied not only to ideas of traditional sexual morality but also to parents’ ongoing conviction that they were responsible and accountable for what occurred “*under [their] roof*”.

"They never asked, 'Could we sleep together?' because I think they realized it's our roof and that would offend us. Loving people doesn't mean you breach all the standards you've been raising them with. They have to know there's a place where those standards still stand, even if they disagree with them. But you can still show those standards lovingly."

-thirteenth participant

Though parents determined a response to "*the sleepover question*", several participants described how their conclusion could be amenable to change. One participant explained how, over the course of several years, he had decided to no longer enforce the separate bedroom rule when his son and his partner visited; another participant explained that "*the sleepover question*" was no longer relevant as her daughter and her common-law boyfriend were, after 2 years together, married from a legal perspective.

At the same time that participants' selective and prompted interactions included issues or domains in which participants would expect certain moral or behavioral standards, parents also described ways that they had accommodated to a child's religious change. In light of religious commonality now being lost, parents discussed accommodating approaches such as listening to a child's perspective without immediately constructing a response, reading a child's book recommendations, or engaging in unprecedented or uncomfortable activities such as spending time with their child in a bar.

"Stepping into a pub and having a beer with your son – not that any of that is wrong, it's just not how we lived our life before."

-ninth participant

Accommodating for the sake of the parent-child relationship also included philosophical and theological shifts in perspective. For one participant, this involved acknowledging that "all truth is God's truth", even when his child's beliefs now incorporated eastern religious practices. For

another participant, accommodation involved acceptance of her son's interests and values despite the fact that these activities and perspectives were not connected to Christian motivation, expression, or community.

*"Just because that spiritual link is not there doesn't mean
that I don't have to embrace the things that he is embracing.*

Because that's what Christ did.

He came to show that all of that is valuable."

-fifteenth participant

Though most parents understood these accommodations as relational pathways to influence a child's return, some participants explained that a high-quality parent-child relationship was the goal, in and of itself. For the former participants, the decision to take a more passive, non-combative approach with their child on issues of religious differences was stated as a means to retain relational connection in the hope of ultimately influencing a child's return to the faith.

*"It's just not worth losing the relationship for the argument because
then you have no influence. You want to maintain the relationship so that
you can at least guide and direct in time, without the argument."*

-eighth participant

For the latter participants, avoiding parent-child relational conflict was described as an end as it equated with both family harmony and the expression of religious values of love and compassion.

*"We have conversations and it's just listening to each other.
I'm not trying to convince her and she's not trying to convince me."*

-first participant

Despite the diverse ways that participants described the motivations informing their particular response to a child's deconversion, most participants reiterated their limited role and influence

in a child's return to a faith that parents understood to have been rejected at great cost and with significant consequences.

"It's so out of your hands": Accepting a child's return at any cost

The desire for a child's return to the faith was informed not only by participants' fears for their child's eternal salvation and the loss of a common faith bond with their child, but by concerns that a child may have to experience hardship or trauma before returning to the family's religious tradition. Several participants explained how their own prayers (as well as the work of the Holy Spirit) were drawing their child toward acceptance of Christian truth.

"There is the possibility that he will not respond, that he will resist to the very end. But my hope and faith at the moment is that he will respond positively because the Bible very clearly says that the Holy Spirit will work in people's lives and everybody in the world, in some way or other, to bring conviction."

-nineteenth participant

Though participants often acknowledged a child's agency and choice in this dynamic, these parents explained that a child's continued rejection of these promptings and convictions could lead to increasingly disruptive or even traumatic divine interventions in effecting a child's return to the faith.

"And she's going to maybe experience some hardships or challenges that may draw her back to Him, but I've got to let her and God deal with all those details."

-eleventh participant

For several participants, a significant part of their experience of a child's deconversion involved the deferral to divine intervention to enact a child's return. This conclusion was equated with trusting God, in his way and in his timing – to enact a child's return to the faith, at any cost.

“We pray, ‘God do something, anything to bring him back’ and that’s a scary thing to say. I believe my mother died because she was my father’s god. You know, she had to be removed. And that’s obviously what had to happen in order for him to turn to God and, for some people, it takes something major like that.”

-twelfth participant

A number of participants recounted similar stories of how divinely-initiated or permitted calamity – such as death, illness, or physical injury - had precipitated a family or extended family member’s return to the faith. For these parents, the fear that a child’s return would be contingent on experiencing challenges or trauma reiterated the importance of not missing divinely-prompted opportunities to influence a child’s return. Though these participants accepted that a “major” event might be necessary, parents’ hoped, for the sake of their child’s wellbeing, that “it could be something quite simple; it could be a conversation, maybe”.

Summary

The various ways that participants described changes over time in their response to a child’s deconversion often involved parents’ decisions about their ongoing role in a child’s faith development. This process included upholding a child’s agency, discerning between a parent’s and God’s responsibility, determining if and when to initiate spiritual conversations, and degrees and domains of accommodation. Negotiation of a child’s deconversion over time also involved accepting that a disruptive or even traumatic event may be necessary to enact a child’s return to the faith. Participants’ reflections on how their response to a child’s deconversion had or had not changed over time often connected to parents’ desire to influence a child’s return to the faith and/or the importance of maintaining a healthy parent-child relationship.

In the next section, these findings as a whole will be considered in light of how participants negotiated, balanced, and, in some cases, prioritized competing values of family and faith. This involved perspectives on the nature of authentic faith – namely, religion’s

purposes, goals, and legitimization. Parents' negotiations also reflected tensions between the static and dynamic nature of faith as well as the exclusivity and inclusivity of Christian truth relevant to a child's deconversion.

“Why that response?”: Parents' positioning of religion

The ways in which participants defined deconversion, attributed its causes, responded to their child, and, over time, negotiated a child's religious change were informed by parents' understandings of the goals and expression of authentic faith. While the purposes of faith involved ensuring eternal salvation or bringing “*pleasure to God*” through obedience to his will for some participants, other parents described faith as a means of enacting social compassion or ensuring meaning and wellbeing. This section presents a series of tensions related to how parents negotiated the nature of authentic faith in relation to a child's deconversion.

“*Sitting in an oven doesn't make you a cookie*”: Tensions between religious belief and practice

Parents' accounts included diverse perspectives on what was necessary to reflect authentic Christian identity, expression, and salvation. Participants' accounts frequently involved tensions between the role of belief (“*faith*”) and practice (“*works*”) in pursuing and legitimizing a genuine expression of Christianity. After outlining biblical texts affirming both the primacy of faith (e.g., John 3:16 – “*whoever believes in Him shall not perish*”) and the primacy of works (e.g., James 2:20 – “*faith without works is dead*”), one parent concluded that his daughter's upstanding works were simply not good enough to ensure salvation.

“Her good works – as wonderful as they are, outdoing almost every

Christian I know – are not sufficient.

We are saved by grace through faith and not by works.”

-second participant

Similarly, other participants discussed the necessity of belief in terms of the fallibility of observable practice or “*works*”. Though an individual may treat others with respect or regularly

attend church, for example, these practices do not suggest that they are, in fact, a Christian.

One participant suggested that, for some individuals, attending church does reflect an internal, genuine Christian belief and commitment yet, for someone with a “*marginal*” Christian commitment, church attendance can be disingenuous.

In contrast, participants also concluded that practice or “*works*” were of more importance in the legitimization of authentic faith. These parents expressed the opinion that genuine belief could not be divorced from Christian practice. One participant explained that though he was uncertain about his son’s level of assent to Christian theology, it was clear that, “*He’s not living out his faith, if he has any. So he is going to be held accountable*”. This same prioritization of “*works*” led to opposite conclusions for a number of participants. Though some parents’ accounts of a child’s lack of “*works*” precipitated a tenuous eternal state, other parents affirmed a child’s upstanding “*works*” or continued, consistent moral behaviour as sufficient to meet the requirements of God’s will.

“There’s nothing I can criticize about her life as far as the way she’s living and responding to people around her, you know. She’s a wonderful person and she makes life better for herself and others and that’s what Christ called us to do.”

-first participant

The tensions between “*faith*” and “*works*” in participants’ accounts were not always understood or described in binary terms. One parent explicated that authentic belief could be somewhat selective and as long as theological “*basics*” (e.g., the words and salvific death of Christ and the existence of God) were accepted, the “*details*” or “*fluff*” (e.g., eschatological timelines, receiving communion, and literal interpretations of Old Testament accounts) were not essential.

*"You don't have to believe every single flippin' detail,
but you have to believe that there's a heaven.
And he doesn't believe that there's a heaven."*

-sixth participant

Other participants discussed Christian expression, commitment, and salvation as involving both faith *and* works instead of a faith *versus* works proposition. Though affirming a child's continued moral behaviour, concern for others, or involvement in social justice issues, a number of participants expressed that without a cognitive acknowledgement of the divine, Christian "source" of moral or pro-social behaviours, these works may not be sufficient to ensure salvation.

*"He places a lot of value on people but he's never recognized that the
source of it is a higher power, that it's God who is at the heart of it."*

-fifteenth participant

Similarly, other participants departed from a faith-works dichotomy, suggesting that legitimate faith was about the motivation underlying belief or practice rather than the content of beliefs or context of behaviours. Along these lines, parents upheld that the cultivation of a relationship with God was the most important indicator of genuine faith. Despite these parents' perspectives departing from a strict faith-works dichotomy, their accounts usually did not suggest that a child's current motives or relationship with the divine were adequate or sufficient to ensure salvation.

*"What I see in him is that he is acting the way I would dream
about acting, right. He is good with people
but the relationship with God isn't there, you know."*

-fifteenth participant

The diverse ways that participants reflected on the role of a child's faith expression (or lack thereof) in the legitimization of authentic faith often informed a parent's decision whether or not to influence a child's return to the faith.

In addition to these issues of religious belief and practice, parents' accounts also reflected tensions between the static and dynamic nature of religion. Participants' consideration of authentic faith as immutable or changing over time often involved reference to how the institutional church had changed over time or how parents' own faith journey had been autobiographically shaped.

***“My journey is not static either”*: Tensions between faith's static and dynamic nature**

Parents' accounts of a child's deconversion often involved perspectives on the nature of authentic faith as static versus dynamic, objective versus subjective, and/or characterized by certainty versus doubt. For some participants, the nature of faith was understood as largely unchanging and objective, thus necessitating a response to a child's religious change which involved influencing a return; most participants' accounts, however, included considerations of faith as a dynamic, subjective, and uncertain reality. This understanding of the changing and subjective nature of religion informed many participants' experience of empathy or solidarity with their child as well as some parents' decision not to dismiss a child's valid and necessary questions and doubts.

The role of change and subjectivity in authentic faith was also connected to parents' accounts of their own temporary lapse in church attendance, departure from strict or even cultish religious communities, rejection of *“legalistic”* or *“fundamentalist”* Christian theology, or resolve not to perpetuate their own parents' approach to faith. For some parents, negotiating these tensions had been precipitated or exacerbated by a child's religious change; for others, however, these questions had been considered for many years or decades previous to a child's deconversion.

“There was a lot of legalism that I grew up in and a lot of religious teachings that weren’t correct, a lot of manipulation in the church. I think I am questioning a lot of what I have been brought through.”

-seventh participant

Reflections on the dynamic nature of religion also involved historical perspectives on the institutional church’s incorporation of components of political or cultural movements. Additionally, parents discussed generational shifts in the belief and expression of authentic faith.

“My father’s generation never grappled with those questions because the strong tradition wouldn’t even let them go there. I think my generation is asking those questions. My children’s generation has asked those questions and found their answers.”

-first participant

The negotiation of these static-dynamic tensions was also informed by more specific examples – namely, the institutional church’s changing stance on issues such as church attendance or sexual morality. For these participants, the observed fluidity of religious institutions over time connected to the consideration that an individual’s expression of faith may also shift due to various life experiences or generational changes. One participant described how his previous experimentation with illegal substances and pre-marital sexual activity precluded him from judging his daughter’s common-law relationship; for other parents, their own temporary lapse in church attendance was referred to in discussing a child’s cessation of church involvement. Similarly, a number of parents’ reflections on the subjective nature of their own faith journey informed their decision to honour their child’s individual expression of values and goals and the need to “*make their faith their own*”.

“He is on his own journey and he's going to find his own way through all of this. It's not fair that I project my aspirations, dreams, and core values on him because I developed them in my own way. I know he is going to develop them in his own way.”

-fifteenth participant

Consideration of the changing and subjective nature of religion and its authentic expression also connected to how participants understood the role of questions and doubts in both their own and their child's faith journey. A number of parents discussed faith in static terms and recounted that they themselves had not experienced a time of significant religious doubt or struggle; other parents expressed that questions and doubts were an acceptable and, for some, necessary element of an authentic, personal faith.

“I really believe it is okay to struggle and wrestle with your faith.

And you need to because it has to become your own.

And it will look differently than my faith journey, and, I have to say,

I think it's a good thing even though it's not a comforting thing.”

-seventh participant

For these parents, upholding religion's dynamic and subjective nature informed an empathetic response to a child's deconversion though participants did not describe their own religious change as a parallel or similar process to that of their child's.

The tensions inherent in participants' diverse understandings of religion's static versus dynamic nature informed not only parents' response to a child's deconversion but also several parents' acknowledgement that their own faith journey involved a measure of subjectivity and uncertainty. For these parents, these considerations were often connected to perspectives on the exclusivity or inclusivity of Christianity's truth claims related to meaning, wellbeing, and salvation.

“And what if we’re both right?”: Tensions between Christianity’s inclusive and exclusive nature

Participants’ perspectives on the purpose, goals and legitimization of authentic faith were often informed by the extent to which Christianity was understood as an exclusive, qualitatively distinct belief system. In negotiating these inclusive-exclusive tensions, participants’ accounts considered whether or not unbelievers could experience genuine peace, happiness, fulfilling relationships, or purpose in life.

“I don’t know how people can live without God, without Jesus.

I don’t know how I did it.”

-twelfth participant

The positioning of Christianity as exclusive and qualitatively distinct from (or more efficacious than) other belief systems or worldviews often informed parents’ concerns for their child’s exclusion from divine purpose, resources for wellbeing, and, ultimately, eternal salvation. The consideration of Christianity’s exclusive and, at times, superior nature was also reflected in participants’ replacing of the words “religion” and “religious” with “*faith*” and “*relationship*” on the demographic form as well as exploring these issues within the interview itself.

“I was going to look ‘religion’ up yesterday on Wikipedia –

and then I thought, ‘So am I religious?’ “

And yet, there are world religions, right? And Christianity is one of those

world religions. And I definitely am part of the Christian community.

So yes, I am religious.”

-seventh participant

Similarly, several participants upheld a middle-ground between Christianity’s relativity and uniqueness. These parents explained how their acknowledgement of alternative worldviews or approaches to truth did not undermine the unique person and work of Jesus Christ and the need to accept these tenets in order to ensure eternal salvation.

“And I think there’s a touch of truth in every religion.

Maybe I need to respect other religions more.

How do I do that, because I still believe there is only one way,

one truth, and Jesus is the answer, right?”

-seventh participant

“I used to think, ‘Yah, our way is the right way’.

I’m not saying the Christian faith is wrong, I’m just questioning

whether it’s the only right way, I guess.

And that’s probably a reaction to him and conversations with him.”

-twenty-first participant

This acknowledgement of similarities between world religions was not, for these participants, an either-or proposition but a negotiation of comparative truth claims within an evangelical and biblical framework. Most often, the exploration of these “*touch of truth*” tensions positioned the unbeliever or non-Christian as “other” and in need of Christianity’s salvific truth and exclusive access to meaning and resources for wellbeing. For a small number of participants, however, the negotiation of inclusive-exclusive tensions took the form of explicit acceptance of the validity of other religious traditions’ approaches to truth. The positioning of the Christian faith in this way was often a result of parents’ own questioning and doubts, interaction with non-Christians, or formal study of religion.

“If my kids had chosen to convert to something that wasn’t where I was

at but was deeply meaningful, life shaping, forming in a more

philosophical sense, I could understand that, perhaps even support it -

which maybe would be surprising to a lot of my former peers.

Because God is not a Christian.”

-seventeenth participant

Considerations of Christianity's inclusivity also connected to some participants' disruption of the "right-wrong" binary often characterizing evangelicalism's posture toward other worldviews and expressions of faith. One participant questioned, with a measure of humour, *"What if eastern religion is right and western culture evangelicalism is wrong? Don't let my peers hear me say that – I'd be kicked out!"*. In contrast to some participants' accounts of a child *"missing out"* or being *"incomplete"* as a consequence of deconversion, one parent expressed that her son's exemplary conduct and life choices blurred evangelical distinctions between "believer" and "unbeliever", "saved" and "lost", or "insider" and "outsider".

"He's not trying to convert me and I'm not trying to convert him.

I don't have this sense that he needs to be rescued from something.

Yah, how can you save people if they don't need to be rescued?"

-first participant

In participants' negotiation of Christianity's inclusive versus exclusive nature, some parents positioned faith as a qualitatively unique belief system while others understood Christianity as a worldview that could be considered in light of other truth claims. Perspectives on inclusive-exclusive tensions related both to ways participants understood a child to be "saved" or "lost" as well as parents' balancing of competing faith and family values. For some participants, balancing these tensions was a function of privileging certain biblical passages and interpretations over others; other parents' negotiations, however, involved the separation of domains of family and faith.

"We're trying to do the tap dance!": Tensions between values of family and faith

For participants who upheld Christianity as an exclusive belief system and understood unbelievers as qualitatively different from believers, responding to a child's deconversion often involved privileging certain biblical texts over others. These parents' accounts were stories of prioritizing relationally-affirming components of faith over *"legalistic"* or *"overly pious"*

expressions of faith. This “within the tradition” negotiation informed parents’ decision to uphold the parent-child relationship while maintaining the uniqueness and authority of Christian truth.

For other participants, however, the negotiation of a child’s deconversion was not solely a “within the tradition” process and involved the separation of family and faith domains. One participant expressed that his daughter “*wasn’t rejecting us, she was rejecting her beliefs*” and discussed how this distinction allowed him to honour key tenets of his faith commitment as well as a maintaining a healthy relationship with his daughter. Regarding his daughter, another participant stated that he “*would rather she live honestly*” than the duplicitous and isolated way she had processed matters of faith for the past number of years. Other parents explained that a child’s health and wellbeing was of more importance than a parents’ need to influence a child’s return to the faith. This decision was often connected to a child’s (now-resolved) troubled early adulthood, a parent’s own regret around denying their own doubts, and/or the desire to have a continued, authentic parent-child relationship in which their child did not experience pressure or obligation.

“Her theological beliefs are different than mine

but it doesn’t seem to be destroying her life so I can’t go there.”

-first participant

These parents did not describe their privileging of a child’s autonomy, critical thinking, honesty, or wellbeing as a rejection of parents’ own faith or a shirking of faith-keeping expectations. Rather, faith-keeping pathways were not always understood to parallel the pathways of parenting goals. Several parents described this domain differentiation in categorical terms, positioning Christianity as a religious system that could acquiesce, without compromising its authority, to values that best facilitated an ongoing parent-child relationship characterized by open communication. These participants did not necessarily see the separation of family and faith domains as an “either-or” proposition or as a rejection of Christian tenets or commitment,

but as a way to uphold the parent-child relationship as well as honour their faith commitment to follow biblical teachings of grace and unconditional love.

Parents were often keenly aware that a decision to minimize or disagree with biblical texts or evangelical discourses related to deconversion could place them in a difficult position between their child and their faith community.

*“As parents of a son who has made decisions that have hurt his wife,
hurt his family, hurt God, we are not going to abandon him.
I see the gospel through the embodiment of Jesus, who says ‘love
unconditionally’, and we will love, love, love,
even if people throw stones at us.”*

-fourth participant

The experienced or anticipated judgement from one's faith community was often exacerbated by parents' uncertainty about how they had responded to their child's deconversion. Though the parent-child relationship was usually, over time, intact, the fact remained that their child had not returned to the faith. In this sense, there was no concrete outcome or feedback to inform parents if they had made the correct decision in responding to their child in relationally-affirming ways. One participant declared that *“life is too precious and family is too precious to let theological beliefs get in the way”*, yet still expressed a level of hesitation as to whether separating values of family wellbeing from faith-keeping expectations was the correct decision.

*“I certainly don't want to make this a point of tension
because that could ruin the relationship.
Family is too precious to put religion in the way and, like I said, if I'm
wrong about that then I guess one day I'll find out.
But that's how I feel now.”*

-first participant

Despite participants' difficult and diverse interpretive work involved in determining a response to a child's deconversion, parents' often expressed uncertainty about their conclusions. These experiences of uncertainty were exacerbated for participants whose faith communities had questioned parents' response to a child's deconversion. Amidst these unknowns, parents consistently affirmed the importance of maintaining the parent-child relationship in the negotiation of tensions between values of family and faith.

Summary

Participants' accounts included definitions of deconversion as well as attributional factors in a child's religious change. Parents recounted their reactions and concerns, interactions with their child about matters of faith, and negotiation of the faith community's response. The extent to which parents' approaches changed over time was often a function of discerning what their role now involved and how – and in which domains – this role should be enacted.

Many thematic elements of parents' accounts involved reflection on the nature of religion as static versus dynamic, subjective versus objective, and legitimized by belief versus practice. Parents' accounts also considered the extent to which Christianity was understood to be exclusive and distinct from other belief systems in realizing the goals of religion. These exclusive-inclusive tensions related to participants' responses to a child's deconversion as a "within the tradition" process or a negotiation involving the separation of domains and goals of family and faith.

The next chapter considers how a child's deconversion precipitated a seemingly irreconcilable position in which parents were deemed responsible for a child's religious socialization despite the ways that faith-keeping pathways often had unintended consequences. It then considers social psychological perspectives in order to further contextualize the diverse ways that parents negotiated conflicting values of family and faith. Finally, it compares and contrasts the accounts of participants with the characterization of religious parents in religious change literature.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Parents' experiences of a child's deconversion reflected tensions between religious belief and practice, the nature of faith as static or dynamic, inclusive and exclusive understandings of evangelical Christianity's truth claims, and competing values of family and faith. This chapter considers parents' negotiations of these tensions in light of evangelically-situated and social scientific frameworks which provide both subcultural and psycho-social context to parents' accounts.

The first section outlines ways in which ensuring a child's faith-keeping, autonomy, as well as healthy parent-child relationship presented several double-binds and unintended faith-keeping consequences for parents. The second section discusses how parents' negotiation of a child's deconversion was not understood as a choice between family or faith. Upholding values of both faith and family often involved a laborious and, at times, evangelically-subversive process of reconciling an "ambiguous loss" (Boss, 2007, 2016) with seemingly irreconcilable commitments. This section also explores how social psychological perspectives provide a lens through which to view parents' selective, hierarchical, and domain-specific negotiations.

In the third section, parents' accounts are considered in light of extant deconversion literature. The intentional, reflective, and relationally-affirming ways in which parents responded to a child's deconversion stand in stark contrast to how religious parents are often positioned in narrative accounts of an individual's deconversion. As parents' approaches often elicited an oppositional response from their faith community, this section also explores how parents' experiences of deconversion were stories of "within-tradition" conflict. The fourth section outlines the present study's implications for applied practice, recommendations for future research, and discussion of the study's limitations.

Stories of evangelical double-binds: The religious failure of parenting success

The double bind of faith-keeping and autonomy

A child's deconversion often precipitated an irreconcilable double bind for parents – namely, both failure and success in nurturing a child's autonomy and critical thinking were understood to have influenced a child's departure from the family's religious tradition. In evangelical traditions, failure to nurture a child's autonomy and critical thinking can inhibit a child from "*making their faith their own*"; in the present study, however, parents' encouragement of these traits was often understood as having influenced a child's deconversion. While participants discussed the importance of a child's ability to discern a personal, authentic faith, these parents often expressed incredulity or even frustration with the unintended consequences of successfully meeting this goal of parenting.

Exploring this double bind, Smith (2017) outlines general tensions between individual and collective values in contemporary society: "Is one's family an eternal centre of belonging and kinship solidarity entailing life-long relations of respect, deference, and honor; or is family instead a launching pad for preparing autonomous individuals to leave it behind?" (p. 114). Similarly, scholars of religion have noted that parents' facilitation of a child's independence and critical discernment skills can be in direct conflict with religious values of deference to external authority and communal norms and expectations. Smith and Snell (2009) observe that the "central task of emerging adult life itself – learning to stand on one's own two feet – is in some sense one big, macro distraction from religious devotion" (p. 76).

Just as the family (and, by extension, a parent) is tasked with facilitating both a child's autonomy and collective religious adherence, most evangelical traditions uphold the individual pursuit of truth with the understanding that truth cannot or will not be found outside the tradition. Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997) oft-cited study of "Amazing Apostates" or "AAs" (individuals who rejected their family's faith tradition) discusses how religious deconversion was often described as an unintended consequence of the tradition's values of "seeking the truth".

The rejection itself had roots in the way they were raised, for they were strongly taught to “believe the truth”. When the AAs tried to figure out what the truth was, religion failed the test In this sense then, the AAs did accept an important parental teaching: to find and believe the truth. (p. 227; see also Davidman, 2015, pp. 29, 108)

It is within this context that parents in evangelical traditions are expected to facilitate a child’s critical thinking and autonomy yet hope that this critical gaze does not undermine the child’s acceptance of the family’s faith tradition.

“If you release someone to make choices and then you don’t respect those choices, then why did you release them in the first place? If we’re going to raise them to make choices - and I believe we did that - and then they make choices that are not choices that we would make... then we blame them for that? You’re contradicting yourself.”

-first participant

The double bind of faith-keeping and relationship

Parents’ accounts illuminated a second double bind: both failure and success in ensuring a healthy parent-child relationship influenced a child’s departure from the family’s religious tradition. In evangelical contexts, parents’ warmth, caring, and acceptance are understood as faith-keeping pathways (Burr, Kuns, Atkins, Bertram, & Sears, 2015; Godina, 2014; Hardy et al., 2011). High levels of familial conflict and closed parent-child communication styles, for example, have been found to negatively correlate with children’s adherence to the family’s religious tradition (Marks & Dollahite, 2017, pp. 111ff; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Participants’ accounts, however, recounted a dynamic in which a child’s sense of unconditional acceptance was understood as, in part, influencing their rejection of the family’s religious tradition. One participant stated that nurturing her son’s sense of being unconditionally accepted did not draw him to the faith but, “*paradoxically*”, allowed him to leave religion knowing he would not be alienated from his family.

Research on family and religion generally and deconversion in particular has explored ways that parents' provision of a supportive and stable family environment may, in attachment theory terms, provide a child with a "secure base" from which to exercise autonomy. More specifically, some scholars suggest the possibility that parents' successful facilitation of a child's wellbeing, autonomy, self-identity, and balanced attachment to parents may minimize a child's perceived interest in or gravitation toward a collectivist faith identity or a close, personal relationship with the divine (see Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 139; Ozorak, 1989; Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 82). Similarly, interviews with individuals who have left their family's faith tradition often note a distinct group of individuals for whom "deconversion can be the *pursuit of autonomy* and is, for most cases not only a search, but an accomplishment" (Streib et al., 2009, p. 228, emphases in original; see also Bromley, 1998, p. 155; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Wright et al., 2011).

The double bind of faith-keeping and the consistent modeling of values

A child's deconversion illuminated a third double-bind: both the failure and success of a parent's modeling of Christian values influenced a child's rejection of the family's faith tradition. In evangelical traditions, a parent's consistent modeling of ethical and moral norms as well as private and collective religious practices are understood as effective faith-keeping pathways (Hardy et al., 2011; Pearce & Thornton, 2007; Schwartz, 2006). Conversely, a parent's inconsistent modeling of these values (or "hypocrisy") is understood as inhibiting a child's faith-keeping (Marks & Dollahite, 2017, pp. 111ff). In the current study, several participants reflected on the ways that their inconsistent modeling of Christian values may have influenced their child's deconversion.

Despite these widely accepted relationships between parental modeling of consistent values and a child's faith-keeping, a number of participants expressed that consistent modeling of Christian values had, paradoxically, influenced a child's deconversion. One parent explained that his children had embraced the Christian values of tolerance, non-discrimination, and inclusivity that had been intentionally modeled in the family. Instead of reflecting his children's

Christian commitment, however, these values led to his children's acceptance of the veracity of alternate and competing truth claims and worldviews. Another parent discussed how his public role in Christian leadership and proselytization made him and his family a target in the spiritual battle between forces of good and evil. In this sense, a parent's consistent commitment to Christian service and "witness" was understood as increasing the likelihood of a child coming under spiritual attack or experiencing temptation.

In many evangelical traditions, the institution of family is upheld as a sacred refuge from encroaching cultural or secular values and, thus, an object of spiritual, cultural, and political attack. Some scholars have suggested that evangelical discourses recounting a perpetual "crisis in the family" serve to reinforce both the sacredness of family as well as boundary markers between religious and secular values (Wilcox, 2004, p. 66; see also Edgell et al., 2016; Godina, 2014; Wilcox, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2004; Wilkins, 2008; Wright et al., 2012).

The consistent modeling of Christian values is not only connected to the expression of authentic faith on individual (e.g., "pleasing God") and familial (e.g., setting an example for children, ensuring faith-keeping) levels but as a collective enactment of truth and morality amidst a culture of relativity (Smith, 1998, pp. 126-127). Several participants in the present study acknowledged this larger context in discussing attributional dynamics in their child's deconversion, confirming ways that evangelicalism is understood to have an "embattled" relationship with the wider culture. As such, a consistent and successful Christian example or "witness" can elicit a response from forces of evil in the ongoing spiritual battle being played out in contemporary society.

The seemingly irreconcilable nature of the 3 double binds presented are further complicated by the multiple sources of agency understood, in evangelical traditions, to enact influence in an individual's religious development. Though faith-keeping discourses and certain biblical texts position parents as responsible to ensure a child's faith-keeping, many other influences in religious development are concurrently acknowledged in these traditions. As

participants' accounts illuminated, a child's deconversion had been influenced by everything from metaphysical forces and secular values to the role of peers and a child's own free will. These tensions between the agency of culture, parents, and children further exacerbated the double binds parents experienced: if a parent stifled a child's autonomy and critical thinking, for example, faith-keeping could be compromised; when parents nurtured these traits, this sometimes led to a child's deconversion. And, despite the outcome, parents understood themselves to be, in part and to various degrees, responsible.

The next section considers the various ways that participants reconciled these double binds. Though most parents acknowledged evangelical discourses encouraging parents to initiate conditions in their relationship with their child, parents' accounts did not reflect an "either/or" decision between values of family and faith; rather, participants' responses to a child's deconversion were understood as a "both/and" family-faith proposition. These approaches are considered in light of social psychological perspectives on how individuals reconcile seemingly irreconcilable situations, in both religious and non-religious domains.

Stories upholding both family and faith

A child's deconversion precipitated several double binds for participants, placing parents in a position of reconciling opposing elements of family and faith commitments. On one hand, parents did not want to compromise family harmony by enacting a relationally-punitive response to their child's deconversion; on the other hand, parents did not want to minimize the present and eternal importance of faith or ignore their role in a child's faith-keeping. In this sense, the upholding of both family and faith commitments was understood as a "both-and" versus "either-or" family-faith proposition. This section begins by proposing that a child's deconversion is experienced as an uncertain and ongoing loss, further complicating parents' reconciling of family and faith commitments. This section concludes with a discussion of how parents' resourceful and determined approaches provide a valuable perspective in social scientific religious inquiry.

A child's deconversion as an "ambiguous loss"

Parents accepted the reality of their child's deconversion but this was not often understood as acceptance of their child's deconversion. Though participants did not describe their child's deconversion as a stage or a flippant decision, parents' accounts reflected the hope that a child would return to the faith. As such, participants' stories explained how faith-keeping responsibilities changed but did not end as a result of a child's deconversion. In these ways, responding to a child's deconversion was not a time-bound, concrete event but an ongoing negotiation as there was always a hope and possibility that a child would return to the faith; at the same time, however, parents expressed that not knowing if this would ever occur (or, if so, how long it might take) was one of the most difficult components of their experience.

The open-ended nature of parents' experiences of a child's deconversion echoes Roer-Strier et al.'s (2009) findings of family reactions to a child's religious switching (see also Sands & Roer-Strier, 2004). Though religious deconversion and religious switching may be dissimilar in many respects, Roer-Strier et al.'s (2009) discussion of Boss' (2007) concept of "ambiguous loss" is instructive. Boss (2016) distinguishes between 2 types of "ambiguous loss". The first is "physical" in which a loved one's whereabouts are unknown "yet [they are] kept psychologically present because there is no proof of death or permanent loss" (p. 270). The second is "psychological" in which a family member is "physically present, yet psychologically missing, as a result of some cognitive impairment or memory loss" (p. 270), for example. Building on these distinctions, Roer-Strier et al. (2009) propose that a child's religious change is best described as a third kind of "ambiguous loss" in which "the family member is *psychologically and physically present but symbolically absent*" (p. 225, emphases in original). A child's "symbolic absence" is ambiguous "when the change threatens core cultural and religious norms, values, and/or beliefs" (p. 225). In the present study, this sense of "ambiguous loss" is likely exacerbated by the ongoing hope for and possibility of a child's return to the faith, an outcome frequently

highlighted in evangelical “prodigal” literature and discourses (see, for example, Dyck, 2010; Rienow, 2011).

In light of parenting double binds, tensions with agency, and the “ambiguous loss” precipitated by a child’s deconversion, participants negotiated a seemingly irreconcilable situation in resourceful and determined ways. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was accomplished through the prioritization of certain biblical texts over others, pushing the boundaries of theological orthodoxy, or separating domains of family and faith. Again, parents’ approaches to uphold values of both family and faith were understood as a conflicted negotiation within the limits of the religious tradition.

Orthodox unorthodoxies

With few exceptions, participants in the current study reported high levels of assent to traditional tenets of Christian theology. The diversity of interpretive approaches invoked by parents in negotiating a phenomenon involving family and faith challenges a specific theoretical pitfall in the social scientific study of religion. Several scholars have observed that the study of religion often equates or correlates individuals’ religious belief and practice in one domain with behaviour in all other domains, religious or otherwise (Chaves, 2010; Pearce & Denton, 2011, p. 31). Chaves (2010) has suggested that this “religious congruence fallacy” is perpetuated when “we explain behaviour by connecting it to religious affiliations, practices, or beliefs that seem consistent with it and from which the behaviour is thought to derive” (p. 5).

Related to the present study, the assumption that highly theologically-orthodox participants would not question, doubt, dismiss, or subvert evangelical discourses and biblical texts related to deconversion would have obscured important ways that some parents negotiated a child’s deconversion. Similarly, the expectation that theologically orthodox parents would approach familial religious differences in exclusively oppositional ways – “congruent” with religious “*shunning*” discourses, for example - would have overlooked how some parents’

negotiation involved subverting evangelical discourses or simply separating domains of family and faith.

Participants' reported levels of theological orthodoxy, religious affiliation, and evangelical identity were not consistently correlated with how a child's deconversion was understood and negotiated. Most parents reported high levels of doctrinal orthodoxy while, at the same time, discussing their own questions and doubts about biblical literalism, the means of salvation, eternal security, and punitive understandings of heaven and hell. More specifically, participants' accounts and self-reports of theological orthodoxy reflected how doctrinal questioning was not understood as doctrinal compromise or rejection.

These diverse findings in the present study reflect the ways that "religion is no exception to the generalization that people's ideas and actions do not usually cohere into tightly connected wholes" (Chaves, 2010, p. 2). Similarly, Wuthnow (2007) discusses how individuals' cognitive ability to consider multiple perspectives or "cognitive schemas" allows a narrative "multivocality" which "permits people to hold seemingly contradictory beliefs". This cognitive strategy – operative in most sociocultural contexts – "parses discourse in separate speech domains and thereby permits different parts of the self to reflect on one another, to speak with different voices" (pp. 351-352). Further, the selectiveness or seeming "incongruence" of parents' approaches should not be erroneously equated with religious hypocrisy, nominalism, naivete, or confusion (Chaves, 2010, pp. 5, 10). In the present study, parents' stories of their resourceful and determined process of negotiating familial religious differences – not always in expected or "congruent" ways – were a function of unwavering faith commitments and theological awareness and not a function of a nominal, uncertain, or uninformed postures toward faith.

Though subversive or "incongruent" aspects of parents' negotiations are intriguing in light of the ways that the biblical text is evangelically upheld as inerrant and exclusive, the disparate and compartmentalized nature of some components of parents' accounts should be expected. In response to social scientific researchers who critique individuals' "incongruent"

religious belief and practice as disingenuous or duplicitous, Chaves (2010) states, “I would say that such [religious] people act the way competent social actors act: whatever they do or do not believe, they talk and act differently in different situations” (p. 10). In the current study, parents frequently affirmed the ways in which their response to their child’s deconversion was informed by contextual components such as their child’s unique disposition, communication style, and the etiology of their child’s religious change trajectory.

As the concept of “congruence” may be problematic in the understanding of parents’ accounts, the concept of “coherence” in narrative inquiry (Adler, Wagner, & McAdams, 2007, p. 1182) provides a useful framework in light of the contextual and often domain-specific nature of parents’ negotiations of a child’s deconversion. Scholars have explored how the understanding or “coherence” of narrative accounts or life stories involves “the degree to which a story produces an integrated mental representation in its audience” (Klein & Boals, 2010, p. 257). More generally, narrative coherence is considered within the cultural context of an expressed narrative. McAdams (2006) suggests that “like all stories, life stories exist to be told or performed in social contexts. Most criteria for coherence, therefore, reflect the culture within which the story is told and the life is lived” (p. 109). The diverse and, at times, evangelically subversive interpretive approaches that participants used to reconcile values of family and faith illustrates the abundance and richness of evangelical discourses and biblical interpretations related to a child’s deconversion as well as a parent’s ability to individually discern an appropriate response (Cohen, 2015). In this sense, parents’ narrative accounts of a child’s deconversion are coherent stories “implicitly based on a recognizable set of human values”, “told from a recognizable moral perspective”, and “evaluated within moral communities ... with respect to explicit and implicit norms about what is good and what is not” (p. 121). Participants’ understanding and “narrative coherence” of these approaches as within the bounds of faith challenges conceptual assumptions of religious “congruency” and expectations of how highly committed and theologically orthodox Christians will respond to a child’s religious change.

The next section considers participants' accounts in light of how religion is constructed and researched in social scientific inquiry. Specifically, for most highly orthodox participants in the present study, religiosity was not a stable construct, as illustrated by participants' reflective and adaptive approaches to a child's deconversion. The following section then explores the extent to which the present study's findings depart from how religion and religious individuals are often portrayed in religious change literature. Contrary to how religious parents are often positioned as relationally oppositional in individual accounts of deconversion, participants' stories reflected relationship-affirming responses to a child's religious change.

Stories of reflective, relationship-affirming, and costly faith

Participants' accounts of a child's deconversion were stories of the self-reflective and relationally-mediated work involved in negotiating differences of faith. Consideration of these approaches adds to the understanding of family and religious change in general and, in particular, how religious parents are positioned in individual accounts of deconversion. In light of evangelical "*shunning*" discourses, the decision to respond to a child's deconversion in relationally-affirming ways often impacted parents' own relationship with their faith community.

Self-reflection and religion's dynamic nature

As discussed above, participants' accounts departed from "religious congruence fallacy" assumptions of how highly committed and theologically orthodox Christians will respond to familial religious differences. Parents' intentional, determined, resourceful, and self-reflective negotiations of a child's religious change provide a valuable counter-point to how religion is often theoretically positioned as a stable and static construct in psychology and sociology of religion research. Participants' accounts included reflection on their own religious change over time, ways that the institutional church is a dynamic enterprise, and, for some parents, how a child's religious change precipitated parents' own religious change.

These findings indicate that highly committed and theologically orthodox Christians do not necessarily understand religion to be a static entity or experience. This contests the ways

that the study of religion has often relied on single item, uni-dimensional measures of salience, affiliation, or practice in social scientific inquiry (Mahoney, 2010; Marks & Dollahite, 2017, pp. 26-27; Pearce & Denton, 2011, pp. 13, 17; Stark, 1999). These approaches, as discussed above, not only assume consonance between these measures and other domains and behaviours, but position religion as a static construct over time. Once again, Chaves (2010) warns that “the religious congruence fallacy lurks” when “expressions of religiosity are taken to indicate stable, pan-situational dispositions with logically clear causal connections to other beliefs or to actions” (p. 6). The present study’s findings complement recent research acknowledging subjective, individual, and dynamic components of religion, emphasizing context, content, motivation, and meaning (Boyatzis, 2006; Cadge, Levitt, & Smilde, 2011; Dollahite et al., 2018; Edgell, 2006; Pesut, 2016; Regnerus, 2007; Schwartz, 2006; Smith & Snell, 2009; Taves, 2009; Wilcox, 2004).

Departures from deconversion account literature

Parents’ intentional, self-reflective and relationally-affirming responses to a child’s deconversion stand in stark contrast to the relationally oppositional ways that parents are often positioned in narrative accounts of an individual’s deconversion. Though several parents in the present study recounted initial arguments with their child or ongoing “*digs*” intended to influence a child’s return, participants recounted stories of respecting a child’s ability to choose regarding matters of faith. Similarly, parents’ accounts were often stories of empathizing with their child’s journey and determining a new and appropriate role in a child’s faith development. One participant, for example, disclosed how he felt compelled to ask for his daughter’s forgiveness for expressing his concern about her eternal state as he felt this communicated that he didn’t trust his daughter’s ability to make good decisions. Parents’ interest in understanding their child’s perspective, willingness to consider the validity of alternative beliefs, and, for some parents, defending their child from the faith community’s response also depart from the

oppositional and theologically-rigid ways that parents are often portrayed in individuals' deconversion accounts.

With few exceptions (Colaner et al., 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2017), individual accounts of deconversion describe negative, reactionary, and relationally-distancing familial responses to an individual's religious change (Cameron, 2008; Crosby, 2007; Fazzino, 2014; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006) or provide minimal information about parents' responses (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Smith, 2011; Streib et al., 2009; Zuckerman, 2012). Though oppositional and relationally-punitive responses by parents are undoubtedly experienced by many individuals who have left religion, the present study complements a small body of research suggesting that parental responses to a child's religious change include both adaptive and maladaptive components (Colaner et al., 2014; Roer-Strier & Sands, 2001, Roer-Strier et al., 2009; Sands & Roer-Strier, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2017).

The present study intentionally focused on the often-overlooked perspectives of parents in the understanding of the familial context and relational consequences of religious change. Despite the absence of participants' children's deconversion accounts in the current inquiry, the present study's findings suggest that a family's negotiation of religious differences may not always be characterized by ongoing strain and divisiveness. This conclusion does not minimize the many ways that family responses to an individual's religious change are experienced as oppositional, theologically-rigid, and relationally-punitive; participants' accounts, however, suggest that familial negotiations of religious differences, over time, are not always characterized by polarized and relationally-divisive interactions.

Similarly, parents' accounts also challenge the dominant construction of deconversion narratives of individuals as stories of "shared persecution" (Chalfant, 2011, p. 25) whereby an individual's deconversion identity is largely dependent on the denigration of their previous affiliation (Bromley, 1998, Harrold, 2006). Further, narrative accounts of individuals who have rejected their family's faith tradition have often been found to rely on the expression of a new

identity largely through who they are not or no longer are (see discussion of “degradation ceremonies”, Bromley, 1998; see also Chalfant, 2011; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Harrold, 2006). In this sense, the denigration of the rejected religious tradition and positioning of parents and religious leaders as oppositional may be, in part, an expected narrative convention that serves to legitimize an individual’s account (Streib et al., 2009, p. 223; see also Chalfant, 2011). This exploration of dominant deconversion narrative conventions and the portrayal of parents’ responses as largely punitive does not question the veracity of these individuals’ deconversion experiences but is offered, rather, to illuminate the significant ways that participants’ accounts in the present study departed from these portrayals.

Parents’ costly negotiations

In the present study, participants acknowledged evangelical “*shunning*” discourses, which reinforce the expectation of a relationally-punitive or distancing response to deconversion in order to reaffirm the message that rejection of exclusive, Christian truth cannot be condoned or accommodated. Several parents, often early in their account, would interrupt themselves to clarify that their child’s religious change did not equate with an “*alienated*” or “*divisive*” parent-child relationship, suggesting that these “*shunning*” discourses were operative in participants’ faith traditions.

Amidst these expectations, parents, without exception, affirmed their resolve to maintain a relationship with their child, often in isolation and at risk of a negative response from their faith community. Not only did these participants respond to a child in relationally-affirming ways, but they did so at significant cost. These parents’ accounts of defending their child from the faith community’s response stands in stark contrast, once again, to how parents’ responses are recounted in individual narratives of deconversion. As one participant noted, enacting unconditional love toward her son was currently being perceived by members of her faith community as being “*soft on sin*”. Despite these ongoing tensions, she had decided not to deviate from her decision, “*even if people throw stones at us*”.

Though several participants positioned their account in terms of “spiritual warfare” with secular culture or forces of evil, parents’ accounts were more frequently stories of maneuvering tensions between evangelical belief and practice, eternal security and insecurity, or grace and judgement. In evangelical traditions, “embattled” metaphors are often utilized to affirm an oppositional relationship to the wider culture (McSkimming, 2017, pp. 2, 16-18; Smith, 1998, pp. 120ff); in the present study, however, participants used these metaphors to characterize the conflict between their response to a child’s deconversion and the faith community’s expectations. More specifically, many parents’ accounts of a child’s deconversion were situated within the context of ongoing conflict with “*overly pious*”, “*legalistic*”, or “*fundamentalist*” responses from parents’ faith communities.

These antagonistic or alienating responses from participants’ faith communities were expressed by parents in similar ways, ironically, to how individual deconversion accounts often characterize parents’ responses to deconversion: many parents discussed their hesitation to disclose their beliefs, the consuming nature of religious struggles, and concerns about the response of the faith community. In these ways, participants’ accounts of a child’s religious change were self-reflective, empathetic, and costly stories of the testing of parents’ own faith and relationship with their faith communities.

*“They’re struggling and I’m on my own journey,
but I think I’m struggling in some ways just as much as they are.
And I think they’ve been a contributor to that, which is not a bad thing.”*

-seventh participant

Summary

Participants’ accounts of a child’s deconversion were stories of negotiating double binds in which parents’ successful facilitation of evangelical faith-keeping pathways had unintended consequences. Without exception, parents’ responses to deconversion reflected the resourceful and determined ways that both family and faith commitments were upheld. This negotiation was

often complicated by the ongoing hope for a child's return to the faith. Parents' accounts of a child's deconversion contribute an often-overlooked perspective in religious change research and expand theoretical understandings of how highly orthodox and committed Christian individuals negotiate an issue of family and faith. Similarly, parents' own religious change over time – both connected and unconnected to a child's religious change – challenges the static ways that religion is constructed in social scientific research. The relationally-affirming ways that participants responded to a child's deconversion – often at risk of a negative response from parents' faith communities - depart from the oppositional and relationally punitive ways that parents' responses are often portrayed in individual accounts of deconversion.

Despite these important perspectives that participants' accounts contribute to religion and family research as well as religious change literature, the present study has a number of limitations. The final section provides recommendations for practice and future research and outlines the limitations of this study.

Implications, limitations, and conclusion

“You go online and there’s all kinds of stuff there from the other perspective of, ‘I broke away from my religious family – it was so nice, and rrr, rrr, rrrh’. I mean, yah, but what about what that religious family has lost? Their child has lost something really important in their lives – so how do you relate to that? When we went to find reading on it, there’s very little. And it wasn’t that good a fit.”

-thirteenth participant

When asked to describe their motivation for participating in the present study, many participants stated that it had been difficult to find information about responding to a child's deconversion. A number of parents found existing Christian literature unhelpful or inadequate as it portrayed “prodigals” in a negative light or concluded with a “*happy ending*” in which a child returned to the faith. Parents often expressed that they had agreed to participate in the present

study with the hope that sharing their experience would help other families. Many parents also discussed how the issue of a prodigal child was not often addressed by religious leaders or in congregational settings. Participants' uncertainty about or rejection of "parental culpability", "child deficit", and/or "*shunning*" discourses added to many parents' sense of isolation and selective disclosure of their child's deconversion. Parents' perspectives inform several recommendations for families, local and denominational religious leaders, congregations, and larger faith communities negotiating religious differences in the context of family.

Recommendations for practice

Participants' accounts suggest that the process of negotiating a child's deconversion can be characterized by isolation, emotional distress, and challenges to one's own faith. As such, clinical, pastoral, and peer support for parents should identify helpful interventions. The present study's findings provide a number of examples of ways that participants' interactions with peers and religious leaders were not experienced as supportive. Specifically, parents recounted how comments such as "*we'll pray for you and your child*", for example, were, at times, perceived as judgement directed toward them and/or their child (though, as noted below, one participant directly requested this of me at the conclusion of our interview). Some parents also explained how peers' encouragement to enact "*tough love*" by imposing conditions on the parent-child relationship or demanding that a child continue to respect Christian moral expectations (e.g., pre-marital sexual activity) was unhelpful. These parents expressed that an appropriate response to their child's deconversion had to consider a child's unique personality, communication style, and particular deconversion trajectory. Drawing from these perspectives, supportive postures of clinicians, peers, and religious leaders would include acknowledgement of particular family dynamics and narratives versus blanket reinforcements of "parental culpability", "child deficit", or "*shunning*" discourses.

Parents' emotional and hermeneutical labour involved in determining an approach to a child's deconversion provides Christian families, leaders, and faith communities with examples

of how this phenomenon is responded to in ways that attempt to honour values of family and faith. Though study participants reinforced that there was certainly no instruction manual for negotiating a child's deconversion, parents' accounts offer language and, to some extent, frameworks for approaching this phenomenon. Parents' reflections on the nature of authentic religion as static versus dynamic, inclusive versus exclusive, and legitimized by belief versus practice, for example, illustrated tensions that parents identified in discerning a response to their child. While acknowledging the difficulty of this experience, several parents explained that negotiating a child's deconversion had led to a greater level of authenticity in their own faith journey as they had been forced to determine the essence of genuine faith.

The present study includes accounts of participants whose child deconverted from the family's religious tradition many decades ago as well as very recently. Participants in the former category described how they had come to terms with a child's deconversion by determining that even if a child did not ever return to the faith, they would not regret expressing unconditional acceptance of their child. Such perspectives should inform the work of clinicians, religious leaders, and peers supporting families who are negotiating religious differences.

The implications of the present study's findings are not only relevant for supportive practice with parents, but also for individuals who are considering deconversion or who have deconverted from their family's religious tradition. Parents' accounts of their response to a child's deconversion contrasted significantly with how parents are often portrayed in deconversion literature. For individuals considering deconversion from their family's faith tradition, knowledge of the diverse ways that parents negotiated a child's deconversion may inform the content and tone of conversations and interactions. In clinical and other supportive settings, acknowledging how some parents' responses to a child's deconversion involved empathy for their struggle and defending their child from the faith community's response may broaden the often-polarized discussion of familial religious differences.

Finally, consideration of parents' motivations underlying particular issues stemming from a child's deconversion may also inform supportive practice for individuals who have deconverted. Though many parents discussed concerns about their child's eternal state, the issue was often more about ultimate familial separation and not simply an impersonal reiteration of "*fire and brimstone*" theology. Similarly, parents' attempts at influencing a child's return – approaches that children often did not welcome – were often, in part, motivated by the fear that more intrusive or calamitous divine measures would have to be taken to draw a child back to the faith. Clinical and other supportive processes should explore the impact of parents' responses yet acknowledge how these approaches may also be motivated by parents' concern for familial relationships, eternal inseparability, and a child's wellbeing.

Recommendations for future research

In the sociological and psychological study of family and religion, deconversion research is almost exclusively focused on individuals who have disaffiliated or deconverted from their family's religious tradition. Though the present study contributes parents' perspectives to the understanding of the familial context of this phenomenon, the homogeneity of participants' denominational affiliation, reported levels of religious belief and practice, and proximal geography (discussed below) suggests the need for further research. As the quantitative measures were a poor discriminator of participants' potentially differing levels of religious belief and practice, future research should consider scales specific to mainstream evangelical, Protestant traditions and contexts.

A more comprehensive understanding of a child's deconversion in the context of family would also entail exploring the meaning and experience of deconversion within mainline Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, other Abrahamic traditions, as well as new religious movements and less institutionalized faith systems.

Future research directions may also include comparison and contrasting of parents' accounts with a child's account of the deconversion process. As individuals' deconversion

accounts often rely on the positioning of religious parents, leaders, and communities as oppositional and relationally distancing in response to an individual's deconversion, the triangulation of accounts of parents and their child(ren) would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon in the context of family.

Finally, future research may also explore the extent to which religious parents' responses to and negotiation of other potentially value-violating disclosures – such as a child's non-traditional sexual orientation (Campbell, Zaporozhets, & Yarhouse, 2017; Etengoff & Daiute, 2013, 2015; Freedman, 2008; Lease & Shulman, 2003; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015) - are similar or different from parents' experiences of a child's religious deconversion. Additionally, immigration acculturation literature suggests that parents negotiate a number of issues in relation to children's levels and processes of acculturation (Calvillo & Bailey, 2015; Kwak, 2003; Phalet, Fleishmann, & Hillekens, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2014). For many immigrant families, this experience involves issues of religion, individual-collective tensions, and expectations of familial traditions and rights of passage. As such, the consideration of ways that the negotiation of acculturation is similar to or departs from parents' experiences of deconversion would contribute to sociological and psychological research on family and parenting amidst cultural and religious change.

Limitations

While parents' perspectives on a child's deconversion complement existing religion and family research in general and individual deconversion narrative accounts in particular, the present study includes a number of limitations. The intentional focus on a small sample of parents adhering to a mainstream evangelical, Protestant tradition precludes these findings from being understood as transferable, both within evangelical Protestant traditions and to other Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and non-Christian denominations and traditions. Similarly, and despite the diversity of qualitative themes, the quantitative self-report measures yielded little variability between participants' religious belief and practice, further constraining the

transferability of the findings. In addition, the study's findings are also limited by the single-interview format of the methodology as a follow-up interview was only conducted with one participant.

A further methodological limitation relates to the decision not to offer definitions of "religion" or "left" in both the recruitment materials and the interview protocol. Though this decision facilitated insight into how parents' definitions of a child's religious change informed their experience of and response to their child, this definitional subjectivity and - for several participants - uncertainty limits the transferability of the findings both within and beyond evangelical, Protestant traditions. Similarly, participants were not asked to provide the length of time since their child's deconversion, as this would have required parents to discern a concrete, chronological point of deconversion (as opposed to the gradual, non-linear process that many participants described). As such, the lack of methodological differentiation between parents' responses to a child who had left the family's religious tradition one year previous or several decades previous to the interview again limits the transferability of the findings.

Finally, significant limitations of the present study involved both the nature of the research topic and my role as the researcher conducting the inquiry. As several participants explained, discussing a child's departure from the family's religious tradition was not something they often shared or, for some, even disclosed; further, the topic was not frequently addressed in larger group or congregational settings. The difficulty in gaining pastoral or leadership permission to post recruitment materials on denominational or local church websites and the limited participant response to general media releases necessitated reliance on convenience and adapted snowball sampling. As such, many study participants were recruited through my previous or current personal, professional, family and church leadership connections. The homogeneity of participants' reported levels of religious belief, practice, and denominational affiliation is likely, in part, attributable to the convenience and adapted snowball sampling strategies.

The role of the researcher's interests, presence, biases, and perceived insider-outsider status in qualitative inquiry generally and in the present study in particular is instructive in acknowledging several limitations. Just as parents' negotiation of a child's deconversion involved perspectives on issues of insider-outsider distinctions and evangelical social boundary markers, parents' accounts of a child's religious change were also influenced, to various degrees, by what participants perceived, assumed, or knew my own faith status to be (see, for example, McSkimming, 2017, pp. 210-211). In order to privilege and focus on parents' experiences of a child's deconversion, I did not offer, unless asked, information about my own faith background or present status as a non-church attending individual who no longer identifies as a Christian. As I had a past church community involvement with and/or present family connection to several of the participants, some of these participants knew of my current faith status while others, presumably, assumed that my faith status had not changed over the past number of years. Most participants did not inquire about my faith status, though several participants (with whom I did not have a previous connection) directly asked about my interest in this research and which church community I was a part of. The following interview excerpt provides my response to a participant who, at the beginning of the interview, asked several questions about my relationship to the study topic and current faith status:

Glendon: My family is connected to [name of church]. But I will be very frank in that my own religious expression has changed over the years and my involvement there is very minimal. I was very involved there previously. A big part of the interest in this is because my own religious shifts and then conversations with my own parents sparked a lot of questions like, "Wow, I wonder what this is like for parents and if there is a real range in how they feel about this and what they experienced?" And as I researched that a bit more, I realized that there was almost no attention given to parents' perspectives about that. So that was really the impetus for this whole study.

Participant 16: *Yeah, okay. And do you take your children anywhere at this time or not?*

Glendon: We do not attend weekend services but they are involved in [name of church programs]. And so we are connected and involved but quite differently than we used to be and my kids and my wife more so than I am. Again, I want to be very up front with you. And I really appreciate those questions.

Participant 16: *Well, it's obvious we are going to be totally honest with each other, right?*

This particular participant referenced my previous-insider, current-outsider status at several junctures throughout the interview. At one point, my own deconversion was referenced in the participant's discussion of God's role in drawing someone back to the faith:

*"The other thing is you cannot convert anybody unless God's Spirit has prepared them. It would be useless for me to try and convert you back to your faith unless God has already put questions into your mind, right.
And unless you are open for it again."*

-sixteenth participant

Though such exchanges explicitly illustrate the influence of the researcher in what participants do or do not disclose, who they determine their audience to be, and, ultimately, the data that comprise the study's findings, these dynamics – whether spoken or unspoken – are present in every participant account (Browne, 2005, pp. 55-56). The intention of several other interactions with and questions from participants at the end of the interview process were less discernable, though likely suggested participants' assumptions that I was an institutionally involved, theologically orthodox Christian. One participant concluded the interview with the imperative, "*Pray for me and pray for my son today*"; another participant asked if she could pray for me and offered a petition for my and my family's wellbeing (my faith status was not referred to) as well as the study's successful completion. As such, there was a high likelihood that a

number of participants perceived that my interest in the research topic stemmed from my understanding of deconversion as a “problem” to be solved. One participant, at the conclusion of the interview, explained that he received information about the study from his pastor and was under the impression that participants were needed to provide their perspective on what would keep young people from leaving the church. These examples of participants’ assumptions about the purpose of the study as well as my position on the issue of religious deconversion facilitated certain types of interactions and data while constraining other types.

As issues of insider-outsider status are crucial in evangelical understandings of meaning, enactment of values, and eternal salvation, my perceived, assumed, or known faith status was inextricably tied to how the study’s data was co-constructed, analyzed, and reported (McSkimming, 2016). My role as a “known outsider” or “assumed insider” imposed limitations on the study’s findings yet, in other ways, facilitated other types of knowledge about the phenomenon. A number of participants with whom I had a previous or have a current connection (and who are aware of my own religious change) alluded to how my previous insider/current other-than-insider status enabled certain types of disclosures and information. One participant expressed that, *“I feel like I can talk openly with you, because I know that your background is Christian”*; another participant commented, *“Wow, good discussion. I appreciate this Glendon because I know all of this is safe with you. Sometimes you think about these things but you never really process them and it’s good to speak them out because it helps my own understanding”*. Though my previous and current faith status and connection to a number of the study participants facilitated certain and perhaps unique perspectives and knowledge of the phenomenon, this researcher position also precluded and/or limited access to other unique perspectives and knowledge.

Conclusion

Parents’ accounts of an adult child’s religious deconversion provide an often-overlooked perspective in the understanding of familial religious differences. The study of religious change

in general and deconversion in particular is almost exclusively focused on individuals who have left religion and how they account for their religious change. The present study begins to address this gap by acknowledging how the family influences, is affected by, and responds to a child's deconversion.

Without exception, parents' experiences of a child's religious deconversion were stories of upholding the parent-child relationship in a way that honoured values and commitments of both family and faith. Participants' accounts often reflected a double-bind in which nurturing a child's autonomy and critical thinking was understood as the means by which a child would "*make their faith their own*" though, for several parents, these nurtured values influenced the undoing of a child's faith. A similar paradox involved evangelical understandings of the importance of a warm, caring, and close parent-child relationship in ensuring a child's "faith keeping" though, once again, this unconditional acceptance, in part, made possible a child's rejection of the family's religious tradition. A third double-bind related to the ways that both inconsistent and consistent modeling of Christian values in the home were understood to have compromised a child's "faith keeping".

Precipitated by a child's deconversion, the reconciliation of these double binds involved determined, conflicted, resourceful, and, at times, subversive interpretive work that often included parents' exploration of the boundaries of evangelical theology and faith. For many parents, the consequences of upholding both family relationships and faith commitments impacted parents' own faith journeys and changed their relationship with their own faith community. Parents' reflective and relationally-affirming responses to a child's deconversion depart from the relationally-punitive and theologically-rigid ways parents are often portrayed in individual deconversion accounts. The diverse ways that this relatively homogenous group of theologically orthodox parents negotiated a child's deconversion illustrates that individuals' reported levels of doctrinal orthodoxy or religious affiliation may or may not be associated with how issues of family and faith are understood and responded to.

In light of evangelical double binds and expectations of relationally-punitive responses to children, participants' reconciliation of values of family and faith rarely involved an unequivocal conclusion. Instead, parents often expressed hesitancy about their conclusions while, at the same time, an unwavering acceptance of the potential outcomes of their approach. For one participant, negotiating her son's deconversion included a decision not to pressure him to re-embrace the family's religious tradition. This choice both honoured her faith convictions and facilitated meaningful family relationships but did not guarantee her son's return to the faith. Though this uncertainty potentially involved eternal consequences, she, after much reflection and continued emotional struggle, was willing to accept this risk.

"And even if loving him doesn't bring him back to the faith, at least I'm living out my faith. And it makes things wonderful in the family. I think he really felt that he might be ostracized if he came out and told us directly how he felt. It's nothing to reject a person for, so loving him seems like the only solution, the only good thing to do in this situation."

-fourteenth participant

* * *

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Appendices

Appendix A: Qualitative Interview Protocol

Introduction

- *Can you tell me a little bit about your family?*
- *Can you tell me about your involvement in the life of your church community?*

Could you tell me about your child's faith journey?

Prompts/sub-questions:

- *How did you come to the realization that your child had moved away from the family's religious tradition? Were there any significant events that coincided with this?*
- *Was there something that specifically suggested to you that your child had, in fact, moved away from the family's religious tradition? How old was your child at this time?*
- *When did you first start thinking that your child was moving away from the family's religious tradition?*

What was your child's departure from the family's faith tradition like for you and your family?

Prompts/sub-questions:

- *What was your initial response to this knowledge? Which thoughts or feelings do you recall?*
- *Was this discussed with your child? If so, what was discussed?*
- *Did your child's decision affect your relationship with your spouse/partner? (if applicable)*
- *In what ways were your partner's/spouse's responses to your child's decision similar or different to your own?*
- *Has your child's decision impacted how you have thought about your/your family's religious tradition?*

Do you have concerns about your child's faith journey?

Prompts/sub-questions:

- *If no, why is your child's decision not concerning?*
- *If yes, what is your most important concern? Why is this one the most important?*
- *Why are other concerns "less concerning"?*
- *How would you answer the question, "Why did your child make this choice?"*

Are there ways in which your thoughts about your child's departure from religion have changed since you first became aware of his/her departure?

Are there ways in which your feelings about your child's departure from religion have changed since you first became aware of his/her departure?

Prompts/sub-questions:

- *Are there ways you interact/communicate differently with your child? If so, how has your child responded to these changes?*
- *Are there things you wish you did/didn't do or said/didn't say regarding your child's decision?*
- *Are there things you wish your child could/would understand about their decision?*

Concluding questions

- *Are there any other things you would like to say that would help me understand this from your perspective?*
- *Are there any questions I haven't asked that you expected I would ask, were hoping I would ask, or [lightly presented] hoping I wouldn't ask?*
- *Would you be able to give me some feedback on how you feel our interview went today?*
- *What were your reasons for participating in this interview?*

Appendix B: Quantitative Measures

The Duke University Religion Index (Koenig, Meador, & Parkerson, 1997)

1. ***How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?***

1 – Never; 2 – Once a year or less; 3 – A few times a year; 4 – A few times a month;
5 – Once a week; 6 – More than once/week

2. ***How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation or Bible study?***

1 – Rarely or never; 2 – A few times a month; 3 – Once a week; 4 – Two or more times a week; 5 – Daily; 6 – More than once a day

Intrinsic/Extrinsic – Revised Scale (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989)

(Administered using a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 “Strongly Agree” to 5 “Strongly Disagree”)

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| I | 1. I enjoy reading about religion. |
| Es | 2. I go to church because it helps me to make friends. |
| I (reversed) | 3. It doesn't much matter what I believe so long as I am good. |
| I | 4. It is important to me to spend time in private thought and prayer. |
| I | 5. I have often had a strong sense of God's presence. |
| Ep | 6. I pray mainly to get relief and protection. |
| I | 7. I try hard to live all my life according to my religious beliefs. |
| Ep | 8. What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow. |
| Ep | 9. Prayer is for peace and happiness. |
| I (reversed) | 10. Although I am religious, I don't let it affect my daily life. |
| Es | 11. I go to church mostly to spend time with my friends. |
| I | 12. My whole approach to life is based on my religion. |
| Es | 13. I go to church mainly because I enjoy seeing people I know there. |
| I | 14. Although I believe in my religion, many other things are more important in life. |

New Quest Scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991)

Participants will be asked to rate the following statements from on a 9 point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (9):

Readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity

1. I was not very interested in religion until I began to ask questions about the meaning and purpose of my life.
2. I have been driven to ask religious questions out of a growing awareness of the tensions in my world and in my relation to my world.
3. My life experiences have led me to rethink my religious convictions.
4. God wasn't very important for me until I began to ask questions about the meaning of my own life.

Self-criticism and perception of religious doubt as positive

5. It might be said that I value my religious doubts and uncertainties.
6. For me, doubting is an important part of what it means to be religious.
7. I find religious doubts upsetting. [reverse scored]
8. Questions are far more central to my religious experience than are answers.

Openness to change

9. As I grow and change, I expect my religion also to grow and change.
10. I am constantly questioning my religious beliefs.
11. I do not expect my religious convictions to change in the next few years. [reverse scored]
12. There are many religious issues on which my views are still changing.

Short Christian Orthodoxy Scale (Hunsberger, 1989)

Participants are asked to rate their opinions of the following statements from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree):

1. Jesus Christ was the divine Son of God.
2. The Bible may be an important book of moral teachings, but it was no more inspired by God than were many other books in human history. [reverse scored]
3. The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in the modern era. [reverse scored]
4. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of people's sins.
5. Despite what many people believe, there is no such thing as a God who is aware of our actions. [reverse scored]
6. Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried but on the third day He arose from the dead.

Doctrinal Orthodoxy Scale (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993)

Participants are asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 9 ("strongly agree"):

1. I believe in the existence of a just and merciful personal God.
2. I believe God created the universe.
3. I believe God has a plan for the universe.
4. I believe Jesus Christ is the Divine Son of God.
5. I believe Jesus Christ was resurrected (raised from the dead).
6. I believe Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.
7. I believe one must accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to be saved from sin.
8. I believe in the "second coming" (that Jesus Christ will one day return to judge and rule the world).
9. I believe in "original sin" (we are all born sinners).
10. I believe in life after death.
11. I believe there is a transcendent realm (an "other" world, not just this world in which we live).
12. I believe the Bible is the unique authority for God's will.

Appendix C: Letter of Introduction



a place of mind

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Dear Parent,

This is a letter of introduction to inform you about a research project on parents' experiences of their adult child's decision to leave the family's religious tradition. Parents' perspectives are often overlooked in understanding a child's religious change and the goal of this study is to learn more about family and religious change from parents' experiences.

If your child is currently 19 years of age or older, you are invited to participate in this study which will involve completing a brief form asking some questions about background information, a face-to-face interview about your experiences, and a brief questionnaire asking about your religious beliefs and practices.

The face-to-face interview will last between 1-2 hours at a time and place that is both convenient and comfortable for you. You will not in any way be identified in any part or report of this research project.

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. A copy of the consent form has been included for you to review.

This research is being done for a graduate degree at the University of British Columbia – Okanagan. If you have any questions about the project or would like to give your name and contact information to the project researcher in order to contact you, please call or e-mail Glendon Wiebe at 250-575-7671 or gwiebe@alumni.ubc.ca.

Thank you very much for your time and for considering this invitation.

Sincerely,

Glendon Wiebe

PhD student - Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies

University of British Columbia – Okanagan

Appendix D: Permission to Contact



a place of mind

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Project title: *Parents' experiences of their adult child's religious change*

We are requesting permission to contact you regarding this study of parents' experiences of their adult child's decision to leave the family's faith tradition. Parents' perspectives are often overlooked in understanding a child's religious change and the goal of this study is to learn more about family and religious change from parents' experiences. We are interested in speaking with parents whose child(ren) is/are currently 19 years of age or older. Interviews will be in done in person at a convenient time and place.

At this time, we are only asking for permission to contact you in order to provide more information about this study. If you indicate below that you would like to be contacted, we will then provide more information about the study to help you make a decision about participation. Your participation is voluntary, confidential, and you have the right to refuse to participate in or to withdraw from the study at any time.

For more information, please contact:

Glendon Wiebe, PhD student

Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies, UBC – Okanagan

Tel: 250-575-7671 or gwiebe@alumni.ubc.ca

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the UBC Okanagan Office of Research Services at 250-807-8832.

Please tick one of the following:

- ☐ I would like to receive more information about this study
- ☐ I would not like to receive more information about this study

_____	_____	_____
Name (please print)	Signature	Phone number
_____	_____	
E-mail address	Date	

Please mail completed form using the stamped envelope enclosed and addressed to Glendon Wiebe, ASC 287B, 3333 University Way, Kelowna, BC, V1V 1V7.

Appendix E: Consent Form



a place of mind

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Title of Project: *Parents' experiences of their adult child's religious change.*

Principal Investigator: Dr. Barb Pesut, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia – Okanagan (250-807-9955)

Co-Investigator: Glendon Wiebe, Graduate Student, Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies, University of British Columbia – Okanagan (250-575-7671)

Purpose of the Study:

This study focuses on parents' experiences of their adult child's decision to leave the family's religious tradition. You are invited to voluntarily participate in this study if your child is currently at least 19 years of age. The purpose of this study is to further understand religious change and family dynamics from parents' perspectives.

Study Procedures:

Participation will involve completing a brief demographic form, a 1-2 hour face-to-face interview, and a 34 item questionnaire about your own religious beliefs and practices. In the interview, you will be asked questions about your experience of your adult child's decision to leave the family's faith tradition. A second face-to-face interview may be requested and, if agreed upon, scheduled to further discuss or clarify what you've told us about your experience.

With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded.

Confidentiality:

Your name will not be associated with the recorded interviews or typed transcripts. You will be assigned a code number and this code - rather than your name - will be used on all documents.

The information that connects you to the code and all other research materials will be stored in a locked file cabinet or on computer files which will be password protected. Only the principal investigator, co-investigator, and the co-investigator's supervisory committee will have access to this data. You will not be identified in any reports of this research. Data from this study may be used again in the future to answer additional research questions about parents' experiences of their adult child's religious change. Information collected in this study may also be used for teaching purposes without revealing any information that identifies you. This study is part of the co-investigator's graduate degree and information from this study is part of a dissertation (public document) and may be published in academic journal articles. Again, no information from which your identity could be revealed will be in this public document.

Potential Risks:

We do not expect that participating in this study will be harmful to you. It is possible, however, that some individuals may be uncomfortable talking about experiences related to their children and family. At any time, you are able to decline answering a question, change subjects, discontinue or reschedule the interview, or withdraw from the study entirely. Contact information for local clinical counselling support will be provided at the end of the interview if appropriate.

Potential Benefits:

A possible benefit of participating in this study is the opportunity to share your experience and perspective with an interested researcher. Other benefits include participation in a study that seeks to better understand the dynamics of religious change in families from parents' often overlooked perspectives. In the future, others may benefit from what is learned in this study.

Remuneration:

For your participation, you will receive a \$25 gift card. This honorarium is not dependent on completion of the study.

Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact Dr. Barb Pesut (250-807-9955 or barb.pesut@ubc.ca) or Glendon Wiebe (250-575-7671 or gwiebe@alumni.ubc.ca).

Contact for concerns about the rights of research participants:

If you have concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics toll free at 1-877-822-8598 or the UBC Okanagan Research Services Office at 250-807-8832. It is also possible to contact the Research Complaint Line by e-mail (RSIL@ors.ubc.ca).

Consent:

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any consequence or need to provide an explanation. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this study and confirm that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. By signing this consent form, you do not waive any of your legal rights.

I have read the above information and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my involvement. I freely choose to participate and have received a copy of the consent form.

Participant's name (please print)

Participant's signature

Date

If choosing to participate in this study, please indicate if you would like to receive a research summary.

☐ I would like to receive a research summary at the address listed below

or at the following e-mail address:

Appendix F: Demographic Form

Date: _____

ID #: _____

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. How would you describe your religious affiliation/denomination?

3. How long have you been involved in a church community/congregation?

4. How long have you considered yourself religious? _____

☐ unsure

5. What is/are the age(s) and gender of your child(ren)?

Gender

Age

Please answer the following questions in regards to your child/children who has/have left the family's religious tradition:

6. What is your child's/children's birth position(s) _____

7. What is/are the gender(s) of your child/children? _____

Appendix G: Advertisement Copy

Are you the parent of a child 19 years or older who has left the family's religious tradition?

Researchers from the University of British Columbia – Okanagan
are interested in talking to you about your experience.

To learn more about this research project, please call Glendon
Wiebe (UBCO graduate student) and leave a message with your
contact information at 250-575-7671 or e-mail

gwiebe@alumni.ubc.ca



Appendix H: List of Community Supports

1. Family physician

2. Church/congregational pastoral or counselling supports

3. Community-based private counselling (Kelowna)

- Fung Psychotherapy – David Fung – 250-317-3458
(www.fungpsychotherapy.com)
- Okanagan Counselling Group – Helga Illig – 250-763-8885
- Reach Out Youth Counselling & Family Services – 250-763-7892
(www.reachoutyouthcounselling.com)
- Touchstone Christian Counselling – Sharon Egert - 250-762-0682
(<http://evangelbc.org/touchstone-counseling.html>)
- Jan Sutherland – 250-826-8255
(www.jansutherland.com)